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ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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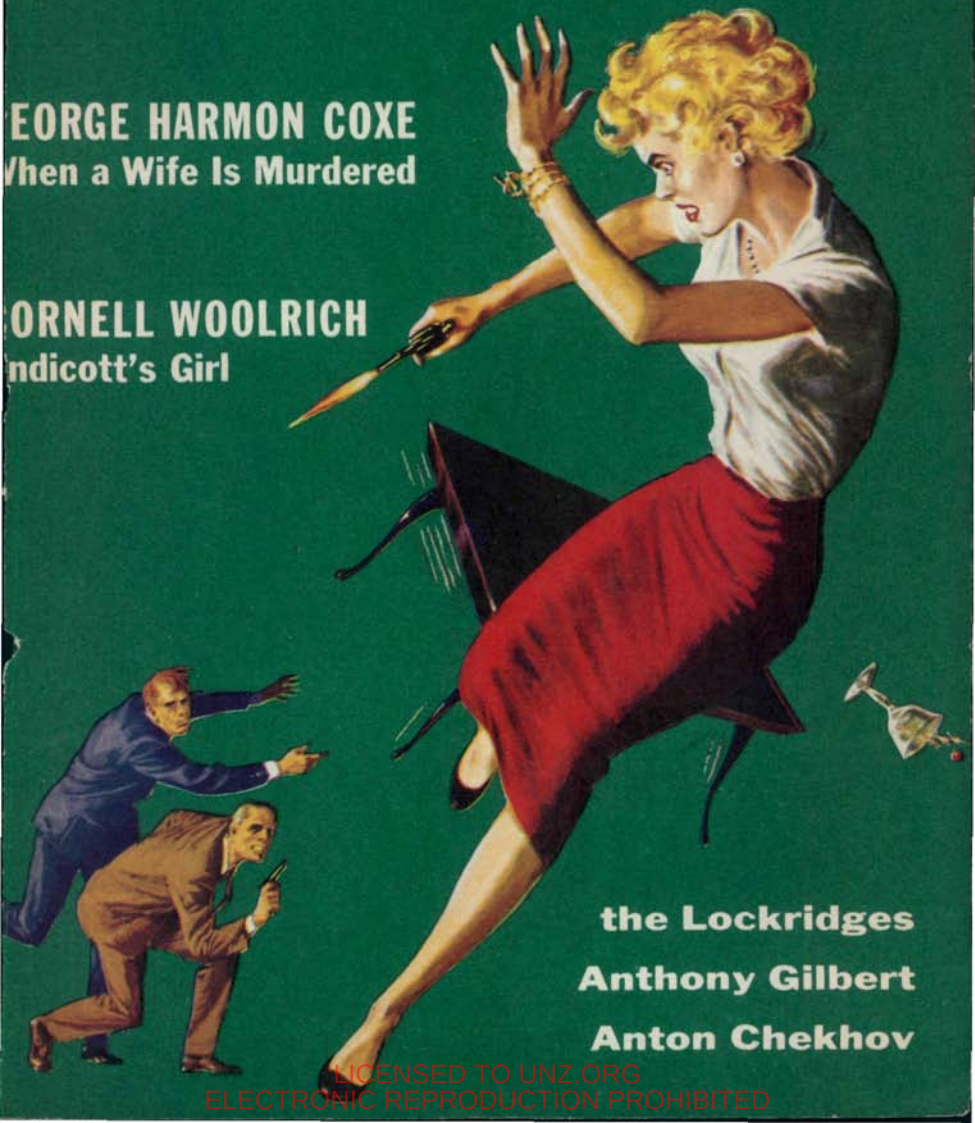

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Anthony Gilbert

Anton Chekhov

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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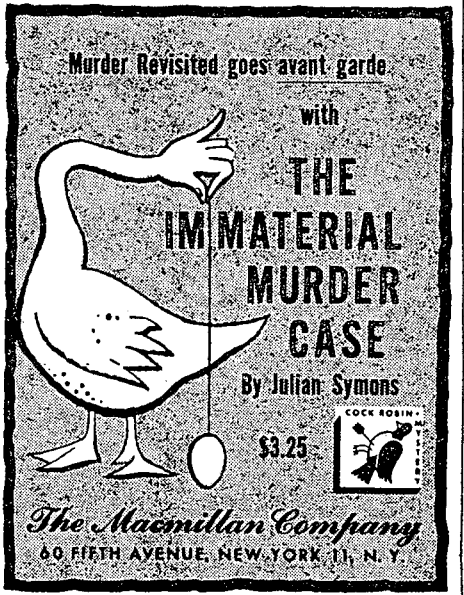

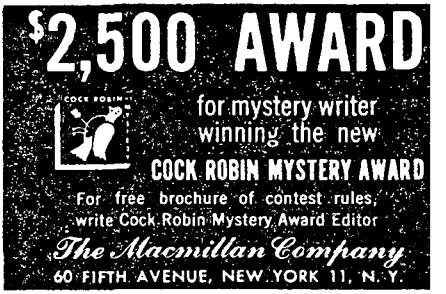
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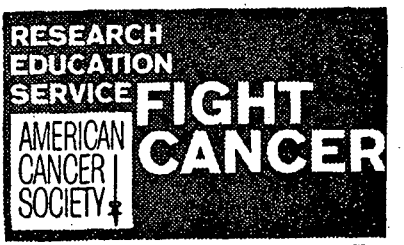

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
TITLE:	***Endicott's Girl***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Captain Endicott
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Cornell Woolrich once wrote that this story is "my favorite among all the stories I've ever written." And, indeed, it is a powerfully emotional thriller about the terror that can lurk in a handkerchief, in a heel of a shoe, and in a highball glass . . .*

JENNY HADN'T COME HOME BY THE time we were through our meal. I couldn't wait because I had to get back to the precinct house. As I left the table, I growled, "Wonder where she is?"

My sister said, "Oh, she's probably having a soda with her girl friends. She only went out a minute or two before you got back." Her school books were there on the radiator, so I didn't have to be told that.

I looked at the books fondly on my way past. *Duncan's Elements of Trigonometry* was the title of the top one. I shook my head and snorted. Now, what earthly good was it filling a pretty eighteen-year-old girl's head with junk like that? In one ear, out the other. Bad enough to ladle it out to boys . . . There was a tiny light-blue handkerchief, so thin you could see through it, caught between the pages. I pulled it out, held it between my thumb and forefinger, and chuckled. Now, that was more like it. That was what a girl should be interested in, not trigo-whatever-it-was. There was a little colored design of a kitten stitched

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in one corner, and there was an intermingled odor of honeysuckle and chocolate. She probably took candy to school, wrapped in it, I thought as I put it back again between the pages of the book, then walked on into my bedroom.

I buttoned up my shirt, fixed the rope that I call a tie, and slipped into my coat. I opened the bureau drawer and felt blindly for my gun. Then I had to open the drawer wider and look, because I couldn't find it. I didn't always carry it around with me, being a captain, since it pulled my suit out of shape.

I disarranged all the shirts my sister had neatly piled up in the drawer, and still I couldn't find it. "What'd you do with my gun?" I called out to her. "I can't find it."

"It's wherever you put it last," she answered. "Don't ask me where that is. You ought to know by now I wouldn't put a hand on it for love or money."

That was true—she was deathly afraid of guns. She used to even ask me to pick it up and move it, when she wanted to clean out the drawer.

"Did you take it with you this morning?" she asked. "Maybe you left it down at the precinct house."

"No," I said short-temperedly. "What do you think I do, go around cannoned-up like an armored-truckman? I simply wanted to turn it over to one of the guys in the lab, have it cleaned and oiled. It's getting a little rusty."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what *I'd* want with it. Or Jenny either, for that matter. And we're the only other two people living in the house with you."

"There you go," I said. Her bringing Jenny into it was pure whimsy, as far as I was concerned. "I didn't say anything about you wanting it. Can't a man ask a question in his own house? I can't find it, that's all."

"Well, look in the right place and you will!" And that was all the help I could get out of her.

The front door opened and the kid came in just then. I was in the hall closet by that time, and by the time I could shift around to look, she'd gone by me.

I heard my sister say, "I kept your supper warm, dear. What are you walking like that for?"

"Oh, my heel came off just now, crossing the street. I'll have to go around to the shoemaker right after supper."

"*Tsk tsk*, you could have been run over."

I came back into the room and put on my hat. "Well, I'll have to go without it," I said. "Look for it for me, will you, Maggie? I want to turn it over to Kelcey."

But she didn't have any time for me now that the kid was back. She was too busy putting food on the table.

The kid was in my room, but

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that was understandable, since the mirror in there was the handiest and you know how kids are with mirrors. I happened to glance past the door and she was gazing at herself in it as though for the first time.

She must have heard me for she whirled and said, "I thought you'd gone already! I didn't see you! Where were you?"

"Why, you brushed right by me," I said, laughing. "Where are your eyes?"

She came toward me and first I thought she was going to fall, but I guess it was her shoe. I said. "Got a kiss for your old man?" There was no answer.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She shook her head quickly.

"Nothing," she said.

My sister called her just then to come in and sit down, and she left me as if she couldn't get away fast enough. Just hungry, I guess.

The bureau drawer was still open so, just for luck, I went over and took another look. And there was the gun, between two of my shirts.

I scratched my head and said to myself, "Well, I'm a great one!" You wouldn't think you could miss anything that size and weight, in such a small drawer.

I hadn't quite finished slinging it away as I came through the doorway, and they both got a glimpse of it. The kid must have been hungry and tired all right because her face was white and drawn.

My sister couldn't let a chance like that go by. "Oh," she said, nodding severely, "so you did find it! What did I tell you?" She continued to prattle on about my carelessness.

In the middle of it, without either one of us seeing her go, the kid suddenly wasn't at the table any more. But we heard the bedroom door close and then there was a sound of something heavy dropping on the bed.

I just looked blank. I hadn't been yelling or anything. In fact, I hadn't said a word. But my sister took it out on *me* anyway. "Oh, anyone but a man would understand," she said, and looked wise. What about, I don't know. She picked up the kid's dinner plate and carried it toward the room, calling, "Jenny dear, finish your supper for Aunt Margaret." Then to me over her shoulder, "Go on to your job!"

Riding down to the precinct house on the bus, I said to myself, "I'm going to see she eases up a little on her schoolwork, she's been working too hard at it. That trigger-whatever-it-is would make anyone nervous."

The desk-sergeant put Holt through to me at about ten that night. He said, "Cap, we've just turned up a homicide out here at Starrett Avenue. Number twenty-

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five. Guy shot dead in a bungalow. Want to come out and take a look?" The last was just rhetoric, of course.

"Yep," I said briefly, and hung up.

I got in touch with Prints, Pix, and the examiner, told them where to go, and then I picked up Jordan and we rode out.

It was a cheap little house, the kind that are put up a dozen or more at a time. Each one about ten or twelve yards away from the next. It was the only one in the whole row that was lit up, except one way down at the corner.

We braked, got out, and went up on the porch. The light over it was lit, and Holt had the door swung back out of the way, with just a screen door veiling the lighted room. We went right into the room itself from the porch. The man was there, lying on his face, with an arm thrown up around his head, as though he had tried to ward off the shot.

My instinctive impression of the man, even before I'd seen his face, was that he had been no good.

Holt and the patrolman from the beat were both there with us. The cop was just waiting to be told what next to do, and Holt was taking stabs at looking around —which I guessed he had only started after he heard us drive up. There's really nothing to be done until after the experts have had their innings, but the average second-grader hasn't the moral courage to sit there with his hands folded when his captain walks in on him. I was a second-grader once myself. And before that, a harness-cop.

"Who is he?" I asked.

The cop said, "Their name is Trinker. His wife is over at her sister's in Mapledale, who's been down with the flu or something."

I said, "How do you know?"

"It's my beat, sir," he said. "She stopped on the sidewalk and told me about it when she was leaving Wednesday. I saw the door open and the room lit up, like it is now, when I first came on duty. Kind of cold for the door to be open these nights. But I went on past the first time, thinking he might have gone out for something and didn't have a key. It was still that way the second time I made my rounds, so I went up the walk and called out to him, and then I stuck my head through the door, and there he was. I happened to run into Holt down at the call box—"

"You been relieved on your beat?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"You come on at six, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"About what time was it when you walked past here the first time?"

"Ten after at the most, sir."

"That places it for us then," I told Holt and Jordan. "It wasn't

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dark enough for lights much before six. And they were turned on, of course, before it happened —while he was still alive. Between six and six ten, say."

This needed confirmation, of course. Nothing's ever certain. The lights *could* have been lit long after he was killed, by a sneak thief stealing in, or the murderer himself, but it was a very slim possibility. The examiner confirmed it as soon as he got there. "About four hours," he said, which carried it back to six—and then the office where this Trinker worked reconfirmed it, if you want to call it that. I had Jordan call the office manager at his home; Trinker had left there about ten to five. He couldn't have got out here in under thirty minutes, by bus.

He hadn't been killed right after he got in. There were four cigarette butts discarded around the living-room—another twenty minutes even if he'd smoked one after another. The soap upstairs in the bathroom was still moist and the ironed folding-lines in a Turkish towel had been erased by recent use. He'd evidently taken a bath and changed after he came home. So the time was figured about right.

I sent Holt out to Mapledale to bring back Trinker's wife, "You don't know what about, until I talk to her," I warned him through the screen door. I like fresh material to work on.

I asked the cop whether there'd been lights in any of the other houses when he went by the first time, or just this one.

"Most of them were lit up. I guess they were all home having their suppers," he said. "The next one is vacant, though."

I said, "Then I wonder how it is nobody seems to have heard the shot?"

He said, "Well, they were getting coal in down one of these long chutes farther down the street, and you know what a racket that makes tumbling down."

"What company?" I asked him. "If the murderer left by the front door while they were delivering it there's a chance that truck driver and his helper got a look at him."

"I didn't notice, Captain Endicott," he said.

"You want to watch those things," I rebuked mildly. "You want to be a detective some day, don't you?" But it was easy enough to find out, there were only three companies in town.

"That's you," I said to Jordan. "Find out which of them delivered a load to this street late today. Get hold of the men that made the delivery, and if they noticed anybody at all come out of here, or even go by on the street, bring them down."

The cameramen took all the pictures worth taking, then went down to Headquarters to develop. The body was taken out, and I

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asked for as quick a report on the bullet as Ballistics could give me. Then I was left alone in the house, with the cop cooling his heels by the door while I worked.

The front room, where he had been dropped, was entirely undisturbed. The struggle had taken place in the kitchen behind it. The rear door of that was locked on the inside, so the murderer had left by the front and those coal heavers might just come in very handy. It had been no slight struggle either, by the looks of it. The chairs and the table were over on their sides, and dishes were smashed wholesale all over the floor. Scattered remnants of food showed he'd been sitting down to a meal by himself when his caller arrived. There were also two highball glasses, one drained, one almost untouched. They hadn't been destroyed because both had been out of the way on a low shelf.

The signs of struggle in one room, the lack of them in the other, told me it had been a woman right away; even a rookie could have figured that out. Instead of trying to run *away* from the assailant, he had gone *after* her, from one room into the next. The bullet hole had been in the front, not the back of his head. There'd been a complete absence of any bruises or welts on his face. If it had been a man there would have been at least a mark or two showing on him.

Confirmation quickly followed. Even my unaided eye could make out a smudge of red on the rim of the undrained glass.

I went upstairs and looked the rooms over more thoroughly than we had the first time. There was plenty of stuff such as letters to fill in his background.

He and his wife had been married four years the previous June. Her picture gave me the impression of an honest, straightforward woman who wouldn't try to hide anything. It was smiling a little sadly, as if she were making the best of a bad bargain. A bankbook showed that they hadn't put away much money. I jotted a reminder down in my notebook to find out what salary he'd been paid.

I went downstairs again. The cop had been sitting down resting his legs but straightened up again when he heard me coming. I was sure of that because I used to do the same thing myself when I was a beat-pounder.

"Spooky after they're gone, isn't it?" I muttered. "Still gets me, and I've been on about a hundred of them by now."

The phone rang just as I got down to the bottom step, and I went to it alertly, but it wasn't a private call. It was for me. Jordan, to tell me he had the two coal heavers down at Headquarters.

"All right, keep them there," I said, "I'll be down shortly—I'm just winding up here."

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I went back into the kitchen again and scuffed the china fragments around aimlessly. And then, as I kicked aside some dishes, I uncovered a heel.

Looking at it reminded me of how Jenny's had come off too; it only showed how insecure the average feminine heel was. It was a wonder they didn't hurt themselves more often than they did.

The screen door opened and Holt came in with Mrs. Trinker, so I put the heel into my pocket for the time being and went out to talk to her.

"What's happened?" she said in a sort of helpless, pleading voice. The harness-bull by the door loomed bigger than either Holt or myself to her, the way a uniform usually does to a layman. "What's this officer doing here? Has Paul done something?"

She was a nice wholesome-looking blonde, of the housewife type. Her voice was the nicest thing about her. Soft and soothing, the kind that is seldom raised in anger. She was well dressed and quite nice-looking.

"I had to leave my sister sick in bed," she said.

I hated this part of it. "Sit down, won't you?" I flicked my eyes at the staircase, and Holt ran up it unnoticed to the bathroom to try to find a sedative in case she needed it. He knew what I meant by past experience.

"But where is he? This other man wouldn't tell me anything coming down."

I said, "Your husband's been shot."

"Bad?" She got white, not all in one flash, but slowly.

"He's—he's dead," I said.

I don't need to go into it after that. I could tell in about five minutes that I wouldn't be able to question her that night. A matron came up to take charge of her as soon as she was able to walk, and took her to a hotel in her custody.

A new cop came up on special duty to keep an eye on the premises from outside, and I started to put the lights out and lock up. I was the last one in the place. Holt had gone out to the car and was chewing the rag with the cop, while he waited for me.

The living-room switch was just inside the front door, and as I crossed toward it my cigar butt, which had grown too small to handle easily, slipped out of my lips and dropped to the floor. I stooped down to get it, naturally, not wanting a fire to start after we'd left the place, and with my line of vision way down low like that, parallel to the floor, I saw this object under the sofa.

People had sat on that sofa all night long—Holt, the cop, Mrs. Trinker—and their feet must have been just an inch or two away from it; but nobody had seen it. I thought it was just a crumpled

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piece of paper, or maybe even a ball of gray waste from a vacuum or carpet sweeper; but I reached in and pulled it out.

It was a handkerchief—a woman's handkerchief, pale blue and so thin you could almost look through it. It had a little colored design of a kitten stitched in one corner. A faint hint of honeysuckle reached my nose, and when I raised it higher, it got stronger, and there was a whiff of something else—as if it had been wrapped around a chocolate bar.

I started to stuff it into my pocket and my knuckles brushed the heel that was already in there, and the lining of my throat suddenly contracted.

Did you ever get dizzy on your knees? I was on my knees there, in front of the sofa, and the four walls of the room suddenly shifted around me. The one opposite me went off to the side, then in back of me, then around to the other side, then they were all back where they had started. But meanwhile I had to reach out and steady myself against the edge of the sofa.

A clock was ticking somewhere in the house. Upstairs in the bedroom, I guess. I could hear it clearly in the stillness. It had ticked hundreds and hundreds of times, when finally Holt's voice came in to me from the curb outside: "Coming, Cap? What's holding you up?"

I was still there on my knees, afraid he'd come in and find me there. I took my hand out of my pocket where it had stayed all this time, and left the handkerchief in there with the heel.

It was a slow business, getting up. I am still only forty, but I knew what it felt like to be sixty. I planted one foot flat and hoisted myself on that, then I dragged the other one up after it, and I groaned with the effort. Or maybe it was a broken mainspring, inside me.

I said something. I heard a sound come out of me that said, "My little girl," and I zigzagged in the middle and almost went down again.

I dragged myself over to the light switch and punched it out, and the kindly darkness came around me and hid me. I put the back of my hand against my eyes and held it there. Outside, from the quiet sidewalk, Holt's voice carried in to me clearly, though he was talking low now. "The guy's as good as fried. Endicott never fumbled one of these things yet. He never misses."

"What I like about him is, he's so human with it, just like one of us," the cop was saying.

Human was right, if human meant to hurt all over, to be scared all over, to be going under for the third time without a helping hand in sight.

It didn't last very long. It couldn't. I would have gone batty.

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But it had driven an awful dent in me, left me wide open. I said to myself, "Be a man. You're nuts. It couldn't be. It just *looks* that way. It'll straighten itself out."

Finally, I moved out of the dark room into the pale wash of the street light filtering through the screen door. Holt was coming toward me up the walk, to see what was taking me so long. He had the makings of a good dick. He could tell even by the pale street light. He said, "What's the matter, Cap? You look funny."

I said, "I had a dizzy spell in there just now. Bent down too far to pick up my cigar."

He said, "You want to take it easy, Cap. We can always get you a new cigar, we can't always get a new Cap."

I gave the cop his instructions, and we got in the car and drove down to the precinct house. The death watch tried to gang up on me in the anteroom, but I brushed through them. "Not now, boys. May have something for you in the morning. Query me then."

One of them called after me, "Our papers can't wait till the morning. Give us a handout at least—"

Holt showed his teeth. "You heard the captain, didn't you?"

I sat down behind my desk and called Ballistics. Kelcey came on, and I said, "Did you get the pill out of him yet? What sweatband does it take?"

"We're giving it the screen test now. Thirty-eight around the waist," he said.

The same caliber as our police positives.

There was a strained pause. But why should there be a hitch in a call like this, when we both ought to know what we wanted to say? He was waiting for me to give him further instructions, I guess. I didn't. Then he said, "Oh, by the way, Ed, I'm still waiting for that gun of yours you asked me to have cleaned and oiled for you."

I said, "I forgot to bring it down with me."

He said, "Hello? Hello? Oh, I thought I heard us being cut off."

The click that he heard had been me, cracking my positive open. Did you ever get nauseated from smelling gunpowder? I hadn't fired it in months, ages—that's why it needed cleaning so bad. The smell came up like a breath of hell into my nostrils. One chamber was empty. I always kept it fully loaded.

"All right, Kelcey," I said. The receiver landed back in its forked support like a hundred-pound weight, dragging down my hand with it.

I got up and went over to the water cooler and drank a cupful of water. I needed it bad.

I opened the door and said, "Tell Jordan I'm ready for those truckmen now." I went back and sat down behind my desk and picked

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up a report upsidedown, as the men were brought in.

One of them was a big stocky guy; the other, his helper, was a little bit of a squirt. They were both half scared, half pleased at being the center of interest like this. Jordan came in with them, of course. The thought in my mind was: "I've got to get him out of here. If this is—what I'm afraid it's going to be, I can't take it in front of him."

Jordan saw the reversed report, but he must have thought I was just using it as a screen to overawe them. He looked surprised, as if he wondered why I should bother, with small potatoes like these guys.

The first couple of questions brought out that the smaller one had been down in the cellar of the house the whole time, and the other guy had been up by the control-lever of the truck. That gave me my out. I said, "Take this other guy out, I don't need him," and motioned Jordan to the door. Then, "Wait'll I send for you." He went out.

I said to the big one, "Did you hear anything like a shot?"

"No, boss."

"What house was this you were unloading in front of?"

"Number fifteen."

Same side of the street, five houses down. "While you were there, did you see anyone come out of any of the houses to your left, toward Roanoke Boulevard? You know—in a hurry, running, excited, anything like that?"

"No, sir, I was too busy tipping and adjusting my truck."

I had no business being so glad. I loved that dirty mug standing there before me for saying that. Fine captain of detectives. But they must have had some information for us, otherwise Jordan wouldn't have brought them in. "Well, what *did* you see?"

"A girl comes hustling along the sidewalk. I didn't see her come out of any house, but she did come from that direction . . ."

A girl. I thought: don't let him say he got a good look at her.

"A cripple, like. You know, gamelegged. Went down lower on one side than the other, every step she took . . ."

The heel.

"She was in a hurry, came hustling along, hobbling like that, and looking behind her every minute . . ."

"Would you know her again if you saw her?" I asked, afraid to hear his answer. "Now answer me truthfully. Here, have a cigarette." Stalling, fighting for a minute more of grace for myself. I passed him a pack I kept on the desk for visitors. My hand shook so, in offering it, that I had to pivot my elbow on the desk top to steady it. My other hand was gripping the cloth of my trouser leg tight, in a bunched-up knot.

"I couldn't see her face," he said.

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"It was dark, y'know, under them trees along there."

The papers in front of me rippled a little, so I must have blown out my breath without knowing it.

"It was the way she was hustling along on that game leg attracted my attention, and the way she kept looking behind her. She didn't see the truck until she nearly run into it; we were blocking the sidewalk, y'know. But imagine anyone not seeing a truck in front of 'em! I said, 'Watch it, lady,' so she cut across to the other side of the street."

"Was she young or old?"

"Just a chicken. Not more than eighteen. I couldn't see her face, but her shape was young, if y'know what I mean."

I pulled the knife out of my heart, to make room for him to stick in a few more. "Could you give me an idea of what she was wearing?"

"On her head one of them round skating-caps, like boys wear." I could see it so well, back there on our hall table, carelessly thrown down. "And then a leather coat, like a—whaddye call them things, lumberjacket, only fancier, for a girl." I could feel the cool crispness of it against me again, as when she bent over me to kiss me . . .

"Damn," I said, deep inside of me.

"Then a minute later a guy in a car came cruising along, slow and easy. I guess he was trying to pick her up or follow her home or something. He just stayed behind her, though, about half a block behind her. Funny to be out on the make for a girl with a game leg. I guess that's why she was in such a hurry and kept looking back . . ."

He was dead wrong about that, but I grabbed at it like a drowning man does a straw. It didn't do *me* any good, but it eased him and his testimony out of the picture—for the present anyway.

I said slowly, "I guess that let's her out. I guess that's not what we're after. She the only one you saw?"

"Only one."

"Okay, that'll be all." But then as he moved toward the door, "Did you tell the guy who brought you in about this girl? What she was wearing, and all that?"

"Not about what she was wearing, they didn't ask me. I just told them about seeing her go by."

"Well, keep what you just told me to yourself, you understand?"

"Yes, sir," he said, feeling he'd got in wrong in some way.

"Now, see that you don't forget that," I added belligerently. "Give me your name and address. All right, you can go now."

"Anything?" Jordan wanted to know when I sent for him again.

"No, false alarm. He saw some doll trying to dodge a pick-up

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artist, that's all it was." I passed a hand limply across my brow. "I'm going home now. I feel rotten."

"You look kind of worn out," he admitted.

"Not so young as the rest of you guys. Check up on the neighbors first thing in the morning, find out what kind of reputation he had, who his callers were. We can't really get under way until I have a chance to question Mrs. Trinker, and hear what she can tell us. Holt, give her movements a going-over, find out if she really was at Mapledale all day yesterday and today. G'night. Call me if anything pops between now and morning."

I trudged wearily out into the street, calling myself a liar, a hypocrite, and a traitor.

I was standing there shivering in the pool of light by the bus stop. Just a man with his life and hopes all smashed. I let the one for my own street go by and took the one behind it—the one that went past Starrett Avenue.

Jogging along on the top deck in the dark, I kept thinking: I've got to shield her, got to cover her. It's not the murder rap, the trial—it's the implication of her being mixed up with him. Acquitted or guilty, either way she's finished; she'll never live it down. I'm not going to let her be dragged through the sewer. I'd rather put a bullet through her with my own hand. I've got to protect, got to cover her.

And it wasn't as easy to decide as it sounds. Do you think duty, loyalty to the men over you, the trust of the men under you, don't mean anything after twenty years?

I staggered off the bus at Starrett Avenue and went back to the Trinker house. The cop was lurking there in the shadows under the trees.

"It's me," I said. "I forgot something," when he flashed his torch at my face.

"Yes, sir, Captain Endicott," he said, and quickly cut it off again.

I went up the walk to the porch, took out the key, unlocked, and put the lights on. He stayed out on the sidewalk, since I hadn't told him to come in with me. I went into the kitchen, lit that, eased the door shut after me.

I picked up the glass, the one with the rouge smear on its rim, and looked at it. They'd missed it. They hadn't dusted it. It was one of those flukes. If it stayed here they were bound to discover the oversight. Nothing could be done about the prints they already had, and they had plenty, but something could be done about this. I tilted it slowly, emptying the stale contents down the sink. Then I stuffed the glass in my pocket, not caring whether it bulged or not, put out the lights, locked up, and came out again.

"Did you get it, Cap?"

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"Yeah," I said, "I got it."

He called after me, "G'night, Cap," as I moved down the street.

"Good night, officer," I said.

I smashed the glass against the curb, on a quiet corner near my own place, then shoveled the fragments into the mouth of a sewer with the edge of my foot.

They'd both gone to bed long ago. I spent a long time in the kitchen with a piece of rag, scouring my gun. The ashes still glowed red underneath the white when I lifted the stove lid. The handkerchief went right away, with a flare of yellow; the heel—leather-covered wood—more slowly, burning down to a char. A heel, a handkerchief, a highball glass.

Maggie had left a bottle of beer and two slices of rye on the table for me. But I couldn't touch it.

I eased open the door of their room, peered in. There was no light behind me but there was enough coming through the window to see them. Maggie was asleep with her mouth open. *She* wasn't. She was lying perfectly still, but I could tell she was awake. She had her face turned toward the wall, and her two hands were up hiding it, and she was crying into them without making a sound. I could tell by the way her shoulders kept shaking a little. It had been going on so long, it was mostly reflex by now.

When daylight came I was still sitting on the edge of my bed holding onto the back of my neck with both hands, staring—staring at nothing that anyone else could have seen.

You'd think hope would have been all gone, but it wouldn't die. It flickered up weaker each time, but somehow it was still there.

She sneezed at the breakfast table and blew her nose on one of those handkerchiefs, a pink one with a rabbit's head on the corner. I said, "Where do you get those handkerchiefs?"

"Kringle's. They come by the set, a half dozen for a dollar."

"You can't buy them separate?"

"Yes, but you've got to buy them six at a time to get that price. All the girls are going in for them."

All the girls—anyone could buy them. But honeysuckle, chocolate—

I said, "Did you take your shoe over to have it repaired?"

"Yes, last night, after you left."

It flickered up again. Maybe she had the heel. Maybe . . . "How much is he going to charge you?"

"Two dollars," she said. She looked down at her plate and closed her eyes. "I lost the heel. He's got to make me a new one. It fell through the sewer opening at the street corner."

I said, "Where—what were you doing at six yesterday? What kept you out that long?" Trying to make my voice sound kindly, casual.

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"I was having a soda at Gruntley's . . . She suddenly threw her hands over her ears. "Don't! Don't ask me any more questions! I can't stand it!" She got up and ran out, with a stricken look.

Maggie started to lace it into me. "What are you trying to do, practice up for your duties on her? The poor child didn't sleep a wink all night!"

She pulled herself together in about five minutes, came out again, picked up her books, went past me into the hall. I said "Jenny," got up and went out there after her. She was standing by the clothes-tree, getting her jacket. I said, "Don't—wear that leather jacket any more. Leave it here."

She didn't ask me why. I noticed that—as though she didn't have to be told. I reached out and took the knitted cap off her head too. I let them both drop on the floor behind me. "Don't go out in these things any more," I said helplessly.

I half stretched my arms out toward her, dropping them again. I said huskily, "Isn't there—is there anything you want to tell me? Is there—any way you want me to help you?"

She just gave me the same stricken look, turned, and ran out with a sort of choked sob.

I went over to the window and stood there looking after her. I watched her go down the street. A minute later a car came drifting along—very slowly, at a snail's pace. It was going the same way she was. There was a young guy in it, a sleek-looking young guy with a mustache. It was hard to tell exactly how old he was. He was inching along so slowly, you had an impression he was stalking somebody. If I'd seen him try to close in on her, I would have rushed out. But he didn't; he just kept his distance, creeping along so slow the spokes of his wheels didn't even blur. I grabbed my notebook and jotted down his license number.

I opened the bureau drawer where she kept her things and looked into the box of handkerchiefs. There were three left in it, two whites and a pink. The lid said they came two to each color. She'd taken one pink with her just now. The blue I'd seen between her books yesterday was in the laundry bag. So one blue was missing . . .

I stopped in at Gruntley's on my way to the precinct house. I said to the soda jerk, "Do you know my daughter?" When he nodded, I went on. "What was that sweet stuff you gave her last night just before supper-time? It came near ruining her appetite."

He looked surprised. "She didn't come in here last night, sir. First time in weeks, too. I had her special kind of sundae all made up waiting for her, but she didn't show up. I had to finish it myself. . . ."

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Back at headquarters, I had Mrs. Trinker brought in.

I started off with the usual, "Do you know of any reason why your husband should have been killed?" Holt had already established Mrs. Trinker's abili: she hadn't budged from her sister's house in Mapledale for two whole days.

"No, Captain," she said dully, "I don't."

This was only beating around the bush. "Were there any other women in his life?"

"Yes," she said regretfully, "I'm afraid there were."

"He was killed by a woman, you know."

"I was afraid of that," she admitted.

"Can you tell me who they were?"

"I tried—not to find out," was her answer. "I did my best not to know."

"You want to see justice done, don't you? Then you've got to help."

"Several times there were folders of matches in his pocket, from that roadhouse out at Beechwood, the Beechwood Inn. I never went there with him. I suppose somebody else must have." She smiled a little. "I tried not to look. I tried not to find things like that. I kept my eyes closed. That's something to be grateful for: I don't have to try—not to know—any more."

She was a fine woman. That didn't make things any easier . . .

I had Jordan go out to the Beechwood Inn and lay the groundwork. "Find out just who the interest was out there, who he was seen with. When you've got that, call me for further instructions before you tip your hand."

Prints called, all elated. "We've got the finest set of trademarks you ever saw, clear as a bell. If you don't go to town on 'em, Ed, you're losing your grip."

Holt reported in, after spending all morning casing the neighbors. "He had a bad rep. They all had a hammer handy when I brought up the name. The one next door told me a blonde dame rung her doorbell by mistake one morning about two months ago, asking if he lived there."

It was the first good news I'd had all day long. Even if it was two months old, at least it meant another candidate. I needed another candidate, even if it was only a straw one.

"Let's have her," I said eagerly.

He opened his notebook, read hieroglyphics that didn't mean anything to anyone but him. "Tall, blonde, flashy-dressed, night-life type. Blue eyes. Mole on chin. There was a man waiting outside for her in a car."

"Did she give you anything on him?"

"Being a dame, she was only interested in this other dame."

I said, "We've got to get that dame, I don't care if she was only the Fuller Brush lady making her

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rounds. That the only time she saw her?"

"Only time."

When I was alone in the room again I called up the license registration bureau, read from my book: "060210." That was the car that had dawdled past our place this morning. There had also been a car escorting the blonde, you see.

They gave me: Charles T. Baron, such-and-such an address, resort operator, height 6-1 (well, the guy following Jenny had been sitting down), weight 190 (well, he'd still been sitting down), age 45 (he'd looked younger than that to me, but maybe he'd just had a shave), and so on . . .

Jordan called me about five, from the Beechwood Inn. He said, "The party is a hostess here, name of Benita Lane."

"Got any idea what she looks like?"

"I ought to. I'm sitting out there with her right now."

"Tall, blonde, blue eyes, mole on chin?"

He gasped, "For Pete's sake, what are you, a wizard?"

"No, I'm a captain. You stay with her, get me?"

"Got you," he said cheerfully.

"I want her prints," I said, "and I want 'em quick. I'm going to send Holt out there for contact-man. You get them across to him. Now here's what else I want, I don't care how you manage it, but these are the things I've got to have: I want to know what perfume she goes in for. I want to know if she owns any colored handkerchiefs with animals' heads on the corners. I want to know if she's got a weakness for chocolate bars. I want to know if she's short a pair of shoes, and why. I'll hold off until I hear from you. If I'm not here phone me at my house. If you want me to send out somebody with you, say so."

He whined, almost like a kid, "Aw, don't make me divvy this up with anyone, Cap."

"Well, see that you don't muff it," I warned him.

She'd be good for weeks, to wave in front of my men and the commissioner. I could get something to hold her on, even if it was only knowing Trinker, and hold—and hold—maybe until the case curled up and died of old age. It was a dirty trick but—place yourself in my shoes.

Holt was back in less than an hour. He must have just stuck his head in the place, gulped a beer, and beat it out again. He had a burnished metal mirror from her kit, about the most perfect surface for taking prints there is.

It seemed another hour before I got the report from Prints. It must have been much less than that, since all they had to do was compare the two sets under the slide. In the meantime I'd walked five miles around my desk.

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The phone rang and I jumped.

"Doesn't check," Prints said. "Not at all similar to the ones we got up at Trinker's place."

Jordan's second call came right on top of that, to give me the knockout blow. "I'm up in her place now, Cap, upstairs over the Inn. She's down there doing a number for the supper trade, and she's bringing up sandwiches and drinks."

"I'm not interested in your social life," I snapped.

He went on: "The kind of gas she uses on her engine is called Gardenia. I promised to buy her a bottle. She can't eat anything sweet, her teeth are on the blink. All her hanks are white with just her initials on 'em. The only thing I haven't turned up yet is about the kicks. She admits she knows Trinker, but she doesn't know he's dead yet—I can tell that by the way she talks. Furthermore, she was singing downstairs here at six last night, like she is now—I found that out from the waiters. How'm I doing, Cap?"

I felt like saying, "You're cutting my heart out." But I managed a hollow, "Great stuff. Stick with it. Maybe we'll pull her in shortly, just on general principles."

I couldn't stand it around the precinct after that. I flung them the usual, "Call me home if there are any new developments" and left. That got me home ahead of my usual time, so they weren't expecting me. Maggie must have been out marketing. The kid was there, standing where the phone was, with her back to me. The front door didn't make any noise opening. I could see her from where I was, standing in the door. Her voice reached me; it sounded strained, furry with panic. "What do you want to see me about?"

Blackmail! That was the thought that exploded in my brain. Somebody had seen her—last night; somebody was threatening her with exposure.

Her voice dropped in acquiescence. "The bandstand in the park . . . Yes, I know where it is . . . All right—I'll come."

She must have sensed me standing out in the hall. Her elbow hitched abruptly and there was a click. I heard her give a frightened intake of breath. She didn't turn around, just stood there with her head averted.

I walked slowly up behind her, rested both my hands on her shoulders. I could feel the spasmodic shiver course up her spine.

"Who was that?"

"A boy I know in school."

I made her turn around and look at me—but not roughly, gently. She didn't want to, but I made her. I said, "Let me help you, Jenny. That's what I'm for."

I couldn't get a word out of her. A greater terror held her mute. Just a haunted look on her face, of one on the edge of an abyss.

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I dropped my arms finally and turned away. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was better not to talk about it, maybe it was better to finish it out in pantomime.

Maggie came in, bustled around. The meal was an awful thing. We just sat there like two people in the line-up. I would have given anything for Maggie's obliviousness, peace of mind. She said, "I don't know what's the matter with you two, after I go to all the trouble of cooking . . ." Afterward she filled a basket full of jellies and things, said she was going to help out at her church bazaar or something like that.

I heard her go but it was like being in a trance. And then Endicott and his girl were left alone. An old war-horse who had had the tables turned on him, by some dirty trick of fate . . .

The phone rang again, and she heaved out of her chair. I went over to it, but it was only Holt. "Hey, Cap, Jordan hasn't called back any more from the Beechwood. Don't you think we should have heard from him again by now? He may be in a jam."

"See if you can get word to him to bring the dame in." I wondered what I was going to hold her on. But I had to have somebody; it was her tough luck she'd once asked the way to Trinker's house two months ago.

But all this was just a side issue to the main problem. I kept saying to myself: "The bandstand in the park. I've got to get him. I've got to get him and shut him up." I only knew of one way to shut him up, to shut him up so that he could never menace her again. I only had to look at her, sitting there gripping her chair, to know that I was going to take that way.

I went with pretended casualness into my own room. She didn't seem to be watching, didn't seem to be aware of what I was doing. I took my gun out and pocketed it. I came out again, still casual, moved past her toward the door. I mumbled something like: "Got to go down to the job again. Stay here until Maggie comes back . . ."

I don't know whether I'm not a good actor or whether it was feminine intuition. But suddenly she was up, her arms were around me, trying to hold me, trying to keep me back.

"No! I know where you're going! I know what you're going to do! You took your gun! Daddy . . ."

I thrust her aside, but she tried to hang on. I just kept stomping forward, with my face expressionless, dragging her after me down the hall like so much dead weight. She was going wild now, hysterical. I reached up over my shoulder, pried her hands off me, held the two of them together by the wrists, with one hand, pulled her into a little windowless spare room we had off the hall. I locked the door

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on her, took the key out. She was beating a frantic tattoo on it, almost incoherent, calling for help from someone who wasn't there. "Aunt Margaret, stop him! He's going to kill someone!"

The phone started again, just as I opened the outside door. That wouldn't be the precinct, so soon again. There was, I remembered a hot dog concession at the park entrance, open until midnight every night. It provided refreshment for homeward-bound spooners. It provided a pay phone, too.

"Coming, damn you, coming," I growled as I closed the door after me and lurched heavily out into the street. Everyone protects his own, even police captains.

The lake came into view as I followed the curving driveway, and the deserted bandstand was outlined against the stars. There were no more leaves on the trees, no boats on the water, no cars in motion along the driveway. It was too late in the year for the park to be used for anything—except blackmail and murder.

Two things glowed red ahead of me as I came along: the ruby tail-light of the car standing motionless in front of the bandstand and the smaller gleam of a cigarette under the black sheltering roof of the structure. The number checked with the one I had taken from the car that had gone slowly past our place this morning. I didn't have to refer to it, I knew it by heart. 060210. So his name was Charles T. Baron, was it?

I kept the motionless car between me and the bandstand as I soft-shoed up on him—so that he wouldn't catch on, break and run. Then when I was up to its rear fender, I came out around from behind it, went up the two steps into the bandstand, with my gun out. I said, "Come here, you."

He was a silhouette against the lake through the open sides of the structure. I saw him jump with shock, and his cigarette fell down in a little gush of red sparks on the floor.

I didn't wait for him to come to me. I went to him. I said, "Is your name Charles T. Baron?" He didn't have to answer if he didn't want to. It wasn't important. The real answer was behind my curved finger-joint, anyway.

I said, "D'you know me? D'you know who I am?" He was too frightened to answer, could only shake his head.

I did want the answer to what I asked him next. My mind was a policeman's mind, not a murderer's; it had to have its confession before it executed justice. "Did you see her last night? Did you see her—with this?" I hitched the gun muzzle upward to emphasize it. "You know who I mean."

I was gripping him by the shoulder with my other hand, holding him in front of me. He could hardly articulate with terror.

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He'd seen the glint of the gun by now, if he hadn't before. "Yes," he breathed, "I—I saw it go off . . ."

That was his death warrant.

I pulled the trigger and it flamed out, lighting up his eyes, dilated with horror.

It had a terrific kick to it, worse than I'd ever remembered—it was so long since I'd fired it last. Such a kick that it pitched upward, the bullet going off harmlessly over his shoulder instead of into his chest. I tried to bring it down again, so the second shot would take effect, when I lost control of my arm. All kinds of hands, that didn't belong to me and didn't belong to him either, were grabbing me, holding my gun-arm stiffly up, twisting the gun out of it, pulling me away from him, holding my other arm at my side.

Holt's voice was pleading in my ears. "Don't Cap! This is murder! What's the matter with you, what're you trying to do? Hang onto him, now, don't let him get to that gun."

He got around in front of me and all I could see was his face, not the other guy's any more. He didn't actually have wet eyes, but he had the whole screwed-up expression that went with them, as if I was breaking his heart.

I growled, "Get out of my way, Holt—don't do this to me. I'm asking you as your captain, don't do this to me! You don't understand . . ."

He kept pushing me back in front of him, sort of leaning up against me. He crowded me back out of the bandstand, and the open door of the car caught me and I sat down involuntarily. He leaned over me, talking low into my face. "It's Holt, Cap, don't you know me?" he kept saying. "You nearly killed a man, Cap." He started to shake me a little, as if to bring me to. "What do you want to do, bust my heart? Don't you know how we all look up to you? Endicott, what do you want to do?"

All I gave him back was, "My little girl, my little girl . . ."

"But he's just a kid, Cap," he sad. "Don't take your gun to him." There was a motionless form lying on the bandstand floor, with the policeman bending over him trying to bring him around. He'd fainted dead away from fright.

"Just a kid?" I said dazedly. "He's a resort operator, he—"

He kept shaking me slightly, the way you try to wake someone out of a sleep. "Naw, that's his father," he said disgustedly. "This is just a kid, a high school senior. Even the car is his old man's. If he didn't go around wearing a misplaced eyebrow on his lip, anyone could see how young he is!"

I ducked my head suddenly, covered my face with both hands. "But you don't understand," I kept saying.

"*I* understand," he assured me, hand on my shaking shoulder. "I'm

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not a parent, but I guess I know how it is—you just naturally get all burned up the first time they fall in love. But, hell, Cap, suppose they *were* sweet on each other. Suppose she *did* go around with him after you forbid her to. Suppose she *did* sneak your gun out of the house to show it to him and then it went off accidentally while they were jiggling it around and they nearly got hurt. Suppose *all* that? Don't take your gun to the brat, Cap! That's no way. You been working too hard . . ."

I said. "How do you know all this? Who told you?"

"She did. Lucky I beat it out to your house when I couldn't get you on the wire. I was afraid something was wrong. And something came up that couldn't wait. I had to bust the door down to get her out. You shouldn't have locked her up like that, Cap. She told me all about it. They had a row when the gun went off, each one blamed the other. You know how it is when you're that age—they take their love affairs and their rows serious, like we do our cases and our jobs. He's been following her around ever since in his old man's car, trying to get her to make up with him."

I've been glad ever since that I didn't blurt out, "Then she didn't do it?" I looked up at him, but he interrupted me before I could get the words out: "Come on, Cap, we've got a busy night ahead of us. Forget these kids. Feel better now? Are you over it now? Then come on, let's get going. The prowl car's right down the drive a way."

He turned to the cop: "Send that punk home when he comes around, and have his old man dry him behind the ears and keep him away from Endicott's girl after this. And O'Toole—if you open your mouth about this, I'll take it out of your hide."

He turned back to me. "Come on, Cap. Every minute counts . . ."

I just looked at him as I straightened up beside him.

"Jordan's been shot out at the Beechwood Inn—we found him unconscious in the woman's apartment when we broke in before. She and her accomplice, the manager, have lammed out. We've got to get those two. They killed Trinker. She and this guy that runs the Beechwood must have been shaking him down . . ."

"But Jordan told me himself, just before he was shot, that she had an alibi—and two clues that I was looking for, a heel and a handkerchief, wouldn't click," I faltered.

"Well, they did after we got there. We found a heelless shoe and the remains of five partly burned colored handkerchiefs in the roadhouse incinerator. And as for the alibi, naturally the employees there would go to bat for their employer and his lady friend. It meant their jobs."

I could see how the rest of it

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would be: the kid, my kid, must have come limping through that street on her way home, after her spat with her boy friend, and just after losing her own heel. But of all the freak coincidences! It nearly made my hair stand up to think of it.

I said, "But doesn't this punk's father run the Beechwood? Baron, or whatever his name may be?"

"He's the owner of the whole chain. But he's a respectable man. It's the manager we want . . ."

I said, "Hang back a minute, and get word to the kid in that other car: if he wants to stop off at my place on his way home and say hello to his girl, Endicott's girl, it's all right with Endicott."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ANTHONY GILBERT**

TITLE: ***The Goldfish Button***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Some women are born to look for trouble—and they find it. The trollop at The Blackbird inn was one, and Mary Arthur was another . . .*

SHE FOUND THE BUTTON WHEN she took his coat to press—it had become so draggled in last night's rain. The button made a big hump in the pocket and she carried it over to the window to examine it in the clear light from the wide fields beyond. It was striking both in color and design, a big button of a particularly bright blue, with a gilt device—a goldfish or something—carved on it. No man's coat had ever boasted a button like that, thought Mary Arthur, and instantly she had a vision of the sort of woman who'd wear the coat this had come from. Someone the opposite of herself, she was sure. Glancing up, she caught sight of herself in a piece of looking glass hanging on the wall—a little brown thrush of a girl, neat, shy, and small.

"I could pass you under my arm," Dendy had said when they first met. That was when she was keeping house for her uncle, and it was almost true, for Dendy Arthur was a big, handsome man who'd take any girl's heart at sight, as he had taken hers. Often she'd wondered what he'd seen in her, with no special looks or gifts and only the two hundred pounds her aunt had left her for a dowry. But she'd never hesitated when he asked should he put up the banns, although she'd rebelled spiritedly about coming to this quiet house set in the middle of nowhere, all

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moors and fields and soughing trees by day, and a world of somber enchantment at dusk.

She was a town girl, he teased her, meaning she had come from a friendly, lively village with neighbors on either side and not a face in the street she couldn't put a name to.

"I believe you're afraid to be alone with me," he challenged, one hand under her delicate chin.

"It's when you're not here I'd be afraid," she told him.

But she'd come to the cottage, after all, for what other choice had she? Neither wanted to start married life in a couple of rooms in someone else's house, and the Council flats that were going up near the factory where Dendy worked were for family men only.

Mary Arthur shrank from the thought of having a child in this lonesome place where you could die, she said, and none would know till your man came back in the evening. They didn't even have a telephone; the nearest phones were at Jones's Dairy in one direction and at the home of a retired couple named Tarvis in the other, and both of them a mile away.

Standing there in the window, staring at the button as if it were a magnet and she no more than a pin irresistibly drawn to it, Mary recalled how Dendy had come in late last night, his coat drugged with rain and the bright drops thick in his dark hair.

"Doing a bit of overtime and both of us a bit of good," he'd protested when she flew at him, catching his wet coat, incoherent with fear and anger. "Well, what's wrong with that? You were saying you could do with a new stove, weren't you?"

"Not in this house—I wouldn't spend a penny on this house," she'd cried passionately. "And if you're going to work late you should warn me beforehand."

He didn't understand, of course. With nerves of brass he'd never know how a girl might feel when the wind came snuffling at the door and invisible hands tapped on the windows, when ghostly feet came up and stopped and maybe a voice whispered. Oh, it was easy for him to say it was just the wind or a hedgehog rustling the leaves—but how could she be sure?

In the end it had blown up into quite a scene, and for the first time in their married life they had gone to bed unreconciled. And as luck would have it, this morning she'd overslept, only waking to hear the slam of the cottage door, and all day she'd been tormented by the thought that she'd seen him for the last time. It seemed hours before her heart stopped quaking: she was terribly in love, and still scarcely believed her good fortune in marrying a man who could have taken his pick in any company. She thought of him—his dark, handsome face, his brilliant eyes,

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and the gay way of him. . . When I want a thing I take it, he'd boasted, and I want you.

For dinner she made the special hotpot he liked so much, and a chocolate cake, for he was a sweet-tooth all right, and she rubbed the brass and shined the windows, and then she remembered the draggled coat and thought she'd press it—he was fussy about his clothes, and no wonder, with his looks and the way he wore them. And so she'd felt the lump in his pocket, put in her hand, and pulled out the blue button . . .

She was trembling again now, but not with fear. Now she was sure it was a lie about the overtime last night. He'd been out with a girl, having fun—that was it. She turned the button over: a scrap of material was caught in the shank. That button hadn't fallen off—it had been pulled off, in horseplay, no doubt. She had a terrifying vision of the owner, a big brassy girl, and Dendy, the handsomest man for miles around, laughing together, being warm and loving and never giving her a thought.

Mary turned and blundered into the kitchen where Rags, the little nondescript brown terrier Dendy had bought her for company, came jumping up at her.

"Oh, keep down," she cried in agony, and put out a hand to thrust the dog away.

The terrier thought she wanted to play a game and jumped even higher. She pushed against the table to avoid him, and the milk can went over and in an instant the floor was swimming in a creamy flood. She was so much taken aback she didn't even try to save any; as for Rags, he hurled himself into the milk and began to lap for dear life.

"Look what you've done," she cried hysterically to the little dog. "What's your master going to say when he comes home and finds he can't have so much as a cup of tea?"

It did occur to her that he could go and have tea with that trollop who owned the blue coat, but then she'd want tea herself, and besides surely Dendy would come back. And then it occurred to her that if she hurried she could get to Jones's Dairy and home again before Dendy returned from work. Besides, it would be something to do. She felt she couldn't endure these four walls and the blank, uncaring countryside beyond.

So she took the can, not stopping to wipe up the floor since the dusk came down so quickly and she'd no mind to be caught out of doors once dusk had fallen. She also took the steel chain for Rags and shook it at him. He stopped drinking at once and bounded after her. Before she left, she set the button in the middle of the parlor table, with the curtains drawn back and the ceiling light on so that every gleam should fall on it. Then, if he

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should be back first—to make up for last night, say—he'd know at once she'd found it and could save himself the trouble of thinking up more lies.

It was a perfect autumn evening, cool and already faintly silver. On the hedges the Old Man's Beard lay like skeins of gray wool. Rags was in an ecstasy, tearing ahead, glancing over his shoulder, his impudent eyes bright as candles, then bounding on again. Indeed, he was in such high spirits, since a walk at this hour was unprecedented, that she could scarcely control him. He spied a gray squirrel leaping across a field and in a flash was in pursuit. He never had a chance, of course; the squirrel ran nimbly up a tree, and although Rags stood up and begged enchantingly, his intended prey would not come down. Mary laughed for a moment, then had the unpleasant thought that she was rather like Rags—begging Dendy not to leave her—and she called the little dog sharply. But in this tranquil landscape even unhappiness became blurred: the trees wore the last of their gold leaves and there were red berries on the bushes along the way.

She reached the dairy farm sooner than she expected.

"It's Mary Arthur," said Mrs. Jones, surprised. "Did you come alone, my dear?"

"I have Rags," said Mary, smiling.

"A bit of a creature like that wouldn't be much protection against a murderer," said Mrs. Jones.

"A murderer!" Mary's voice was suddenly thin.

"Why, love, hadn't you heard? Surely—"

"How could she have heard, mother?" interrupted Mrs. Jones's daughter-in-law, a town girl who couldn't conceal her faint scorn for country dwellers for all she'd married Will Jones and come to the farm to live. "It wasn't known hereabouts till midday."

"I've seen no one since," Mary said. "But what happened?"

"That poor girl!" said Mrs. Jones, measuring milk into the can.

"Not so much of a girl," jeered the daughter-in-law. "Thirty if she was a day, and asking for trouble. People that get themselves killed mostly do. I'll tell you one thing, there's plenty of wives 'ull sleep sounder in their beds tonight, knowing Bette Rose is out of the way—leastways, all that know where their husbands were last night."

An appalling tightness caught Mary by the throat. "Who's Bette Rose?"

"The light of The Blackbird," said the daughter-in-law before Mrs. Jones could reply. The Blackbird was the local inn where most of the men met for a pint and a game of darts. "Swaggering here and there and tantalizing the chaps

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in her bright blue coat with those silly buttons . . ."

"Give over, Ruby," ordered her mother-in-law. "Can't you see you're frightening Mary half to death? And even if Bette did ask for trouble, that doesn't excuse the fellow. And so far as we know, the police haven't a smell of him yet."

"So now," explained the younger Mrs. Jones, "you see why Mother thought it so brave of you to come over the moor alone, with a murderer lurking maybe . . . though in his shoes I'd be in the next county by now, and that's likely where he is."

"If you was to think before you spoke, Ruby, my girl," observed her mother-in-law in dry tones, "you'd know that's just where he *won't* be. You forget you're not living in a town any more, where the fellows are like rabbits in a warren, one more or less and who's to notice? Here you'd be remarked at once if you disappeared—right away, unless it's a stranger, that is, as we all hope, and even they don't go unnoticed hereabouts."

"A blue coat," repeated Mary, her senses still in a daze.

"That's right, with great big buttons and a fish or some such nonsense on them. In and out of The Blackbird she was, according to Will. Your Dendy 'ud know her, too. All the chaps knew her—they couldn't help it, with her eyes like saucers and eyelashes that never grew there by nature."

Mary put out a blind hand for the milk. "I must be getting along," she murmured. "Where's Rags? Here Rags! Dendy doesn't like it if he comes home and finds me not there."

The button, she was thinking—the button I put on the table. Any stranger passing could see it through the window. I'll get back first and throw it away. Dendy'll never mention it. She didn't think of Dendy as a possible murderer, she only remembered she loved him and he was her man. And whether he knew it or not, he was in danger.

"You're never going back alone with the night coming on," protested Mrs. Jones. "Wait a while and Bob 'ull see you home."

Mary shook her head. Bob was Mrs. Jones's younger son, a fair giant of a man who couldn't take his eyes off Mary. Sometimes she wondered if she wouldn't have done better to take a quiet, slow-moving man like Bob instead of the mercurial Dendy.

"I've got Rags," she said, drawing the chain from the pocket of her coat and stooping to snap it onto his collar. The catch was a clumsy one and Rags danced about like a ballerina—Dendy was always saying he'd buy a new one . . . Dendy and his promises, she thought bitterly. But eventually she got the clasp fixed. "Murderers are mostly cowards, they say. Maybe they'll be feared of a dog."

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She picked up the milk can, said farewell, and set off on the homeward journey. She had meant to make a good pace, since the road was mainly downhill, but Rags, indignant at being kept on a chain, alternately pulled and dragged, threatening the safety of the milk for which she'd risked so much, and at last, in a flurry of impatience, she let the dog run loose. He was off like an arrow and invisible almost at once; but she could hear him barking some distance ahead.

The shadows that had been creeping up on her now seemed to fall like a curtain and she wasn't halfway back to the cottage before her heart was thudding with fear. Every clump of bushes was the murderer waiting to pounce on her; more than once a tree seemed to change its position and she was certain it was a man waiting for her to pass. She made wide detours, and when a tree, bent like an ancient witch, swayed in the breeze so that the clawlike branches caught her shoulder, she let out a brief scream.

Now she resolved to take the short cut through a patch of brambles—it would cut off a quarter of a mile and any minute now she might hope to see the light she'd left on in the parlor. Dendy was due, too, and at all costs she must get back first. She called to the dog, but she had to call again and again before, reluctant and panting, he came back to her. Then she plunged into the undergrowth with Rags at her heels.

The short cut was a mistake; within a few minutes she'd lost the path, stepping aside to avoid a savage tangle of bramble stems, and then, worse still, she lost Rags. She could hear him barking, and suddenly the bark changed its tone.

"I'm lost," it said plaintively, "I'm lost. Come and find me!"

She called imperatively, angrily, but to no purpose. The barking changed to a heartbreaking high-pitched wail. She knew what had happened: Rags had got himself caught in a maze of thorny creepers, might even be netted by his collar or got his foot in a trap. They snared rabbits hereabouts, Dendy said. She was aware of an overpowering temptation to make her own way back and then let Dendy come back later and search for the dog; but she couldn't close her ears to that piteous cry. As easy leave a child alone in the dark.

Mary put down the can of milk and, with the growing darkness enveloping her—what had possessed her that she had forgotten to bring a torch—she made her way cautiously through the undergrowth. She found the dog at last; he had crawled right under an immense bush and was butting vainly with his sharp brown head at an impenetrable thicket of low-growing branches. She had to lie

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down and push her arm among the thorns to grab at him, and Rags made matters worse by backing away. But she got him at last and once again forced the chain onto his collar. She had no idea where the milk was and had no intention now of going back to look for it. If Dendy wanted it, he could find it for himself. One thing the dog had done for her, he'd set her feet back on the right path. In a few moments she saw the cottage light, and stumbling, calling out, half pulled off her feet by the eager Rags, she made headlong for the door.

Dendy was waiting at the gate. "Why, Mary, where have you been? I was scared to death, knowing you don't like being out in the dark."

"I upset the milk and went to the farm." She pushed by him into the parlor. The surface of the table was as bare as her hand.

"The milk?" repeated Dendy, puzzled.

"Yes. I lost it on the way back. It was Rags' fault—no sense blaming him, though. He thought he was after a rabbit."

"You could have left a note," muttered Dendy. "I thought you'd gone."

"Gone?" She stared at him. Then she remembered the button.

He put his arm round her. "You're shaking like a leaf. What is it, love? Did someone frighten you?"

"They told me at the farm about Bette Rose. Dendy, have they got the man that did it?"

He shook his head. "Not so far as I know. Could have been one of a dozen fellows—they were all round her like bees round a jar of honey."

She tried to twist herself free. "Look who's talking," she said.

"Why, Mary, I hardly knew the girl—not more than to pass the time of day. But I knew of her. A reckless lass, they said."

"Seeing you didn't know her," panted Mary, "it's a funny thing you should have a button off her coat in your pocket."

"So that's where you found it. Aye, I'd forgotten. My torch picked it out on my way home last night and I thought it was a pretty thing and I'd bring it home to you."

"One of *her* buttons?" The outrage in her voice was as whistling as the north wind.

"How was I to know it came off her coat? I never saw her wear it. I didn't even know she had a blue coat till the chaps told me—dinner-time that was, when the story broke. It seems some lads found her body down by the pool in Maidment's Copse."

"How—how was it?" She forced herself to utter the words.

"Strangled, they say, with her own scarf. Not that I found the button near the copse. They must have had a right dingdong fight of it down the hill. Poor lass!"

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"Wasn't she a bad lot, like Ruby Jones said?" Her voice was openly jealous.

"She liked her fun, but it's hard to pay with your life. What's Ruby got against her?" he added sharply. "Surely Will . . . ?"

"I don't know. I never thought. When was it?"

"Last night, they say. If I'd come back a bit sooner I might have seen the pair of them, but they were off the ridge road when I went by." He gave a shudder. "It could be she was down in the copse already. One thing, I didn't see hide nor hair of her nor anyone else, and so I told the sergeant."

"Which sergeant?"

"Sergeant Bates from Amberville—that's where Bette lived. If that husband of hers had been half of a man," he added grimly, "he'd have seen to it she didn't have the chance to get herself murdered."

"You never spoke of the button last night," she reminded him slowly.

"Because, if you mind, you came at me like a young tiger-cat and I forgot all else. I never thought of it again till that sergeant started asking questions."

"And—where is it now?"

He took it out of his pocket. "I was only waiting for you to get back to hand it over to the police," he said.

"To the police?"

"It could be a clue, though I don't know exactly how. Leastways, I could tell them where I found it and when. We don't want it in our house, seeing where it came from."

She said quickly, "Do they know you have it?"

"Not yet. Mary, what's got into you?"

"Does anyone else know?" she persisted.

"Only you and me." His voice had that puzzled note again. "Mary, what's to do?"

She caught him by the arms. "Then, Dendy, don't go to the police. Let's just throw it away—let them find it for themselves."

"Mary, my dear, they've been combing the place for that button. They won't believe it grew up out of the grass overnight, like a flower coming into blossom."

"Then throw it among the brambles. Why should we be mixed up in a case of murder? It's not as though we could tell them aught that would help."

He said, "What's this about, my dear? Surely you don't think that I . . . If so, come into the open. Let's have no secrets between us."

"It's not what *I* think," said Mary. "There's others don't know you as I do, and the police must take someone. Do as I say, Dendy, and I'll not be asking you another thing for a year."

But he shook his head. "You don't think what you ask. Why, if I

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had a hand in poor Bette's death, would I bring the button home to show my wife?"

"But they could say you didn't show it to me! Oh, you meant to, I know, but if they ask me?"

But she couldn't move him. He had one final argument that he brought out with great reluctance.

"I must tell them for both our sakes," he assured her. "Otherwise, there's no knowing, one of these days it might come to you that it was a queer thing I agreed to suppress a clue, because that's what the police would call it. Maybe he had his reasons, you might think."

"No, no!"

"Folks change, and that's a risk I'll not take, gambler though I may be. Now, mind you bolt the door while I'm away. I'll be no longer than I can help."

"I'll not be left alone in this house with that murderer at large," she told him flatly. "If you've made up your mind to go, then I'll come with you."

He realized she meant what she said, and, indeed, it was what he had anticipated. He saw her pick up the button as if to reinforce her argument, and he took it gently from her.

"It 'ull be safer with me," he said. "I don't want to go hunting through the brambles on hands and knees looking for where you happened to drop it by accident."

She gave him a piercing glance. "Get your scarf on," he said. "Oh, and we'll let Rags have his dinner while we're away. We don't need him with us, getting lost again. And when we come back, Mary, I've some news that'll bring the light into your eyes. Old Ames's house may be going begging after Christmas. They say he's going to live with a married son now he's a widower, and I've put in for the house."

She could scarcely believe him; for the moment she half forgot about the grisly business in which they were concerned.

"A house of our own! Oh, Dendy!"

She ran into the kitchen to feed the little dog; the remains of the milk was still on the floor.

"Leave that till we come back," Dendy said impatiently.

When Rags saw the plate in his hand he came jumping round her, almost oversetting Dendy who was leaning against the table.

"Be off with you," he said, but not ill-naturedly. "You'll be the death of me yet."

Shutting the kitchen door on the barking terrier they set out, making for the telephone box at the cross-roads. It was a mite farther than the phone at the Tarvis's, but Mrs. Tarvis was the biggest gossip hereabouts, and Heaven only knew what story would go the rounds within a few hours. Dendy suggested they should take the short cut through the briars.

"You'll not lose your way with

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me," he promised. "And we might even come upon the milk you lost. We'll both of us be the better for a cup of tea on a night like this."

Soon the path narrowed till they had to walk single file. Mary went first with her husband behind her, shining his torch on the road ahead. Both had fallen silent, each occupied with personal thoughts. Mary felt a fresh stab of unease; something troubled her—something she couldn't identify—something about Dendy's story that didn't fit. Suddenly she knew what it was and stopped so abruptly that he almost bumped into her.

"What is it?" he exclaimed. "Have you seen a snake?"

But Dendy knew that snakes were unlikely at this time of year and at this hour of night.

Mary turned to him and in the torchlight he saw that her face was sheet-white. Like a corpse, he thought, like a corpse.

"Dendy," she said, "answer me something. Why *didn't* you tell the sergeant about the button when he was asking questions this morning?"

"And have him come down to the cottage, scaring the life out of you?"

"Not if you were with him," she insisted.

"And me on piece-work? Be careful, my dear, or you'll be persuading yourself I do know something about Bette's death."

Her ashen face still stared into his. "Dendy, you didn't do it? You didn't know her better than you say?"

"If you've any doubts, Mary, you can tell the police all about it when they come." His voice was quite calm. Then suddenly it changed again. "Well, I'm jiggered! If we haven't walked straight into the can of milk, and not even upset. There, under that bush, see."

She turned, stooping to look where he pointed. In a flash he had dropped the torch into his pocket and seizing the ends of the stout woollen scarf, he drew them tight, then tighter still. Her weight fell against him, but being smaller and taken by surprise, she didn't struggle as last night's victim had done. In the darkness he couldn't see her face, and the cry she would have uttered was smothered in her throat. There was another sound, though, a long warning hoot, and his heart jumped into his throat. But it was only a passing owl, and birds can't speak, he told himself—birds can't speak.

He left her there in the dark, knowing she'd not be found before morning, and before then, long before, he'd have put out the alarm. It was easy to foresee what the police would think—that Mary had encountered last night's killer on her way back from the dairy—a homicidal maniac, of course. Anyway, they'd never suspect the truth.

On the way home he took the

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button and flung it into a nest of briars. It could lie there undetected till Judgment Day . . .

It was a chilly night but by the time Dendy reached the cottage he was in a lather of sweat. He'd never intended to go to these lengths, and he told himself fiercely it was Mary's own fault. If she hadn't gone mucking about with the coat she'd never have set eyes on the button that, unaccountably, he'd forgotten what with the quarrel they'd had on his return. When he'd picked it up the night before there'd been no thought in his mind of doing Bette harm. They'd been wrestling and tugging in a loverlike way for, no doubt of it, he was over the moon with love for her. He'd never have offered her a ring, mind you, but she excited him; she did something Mary had never done. She was like a potion in his blood, and he couldn't free his senses of her. And she'd sworn he was the only one, the only one, and then last night she'd teased and taunted until she let slip that he was only one of a string, and half not knowing what he did he'd caught her gay blue scarf . . .

He shuddered. When he came back this evening and saw the button on the table, he knew there was only one thing to be done: he couldn't risk letting Mary live. Sooner or later she'd let out a word and it would be the gallows for him. She was a quiet one, true, but she'd shown him last night she could flare up like a Chinese cracker, and Dendy Arthur was a man that loved his life.

Rags was barking fit to burst when he got back. "Stop that!" he shouted, flinging open the door. The little terrier shot past him into the dark. Dendy called him but the dog paid no attention, and really it was best he should go, all of a piece with the story Dendy intended to tell.

He put on the kettle to make some tea, then remembered there was no milk. He looked at his watch. Wait a while longer before raising the alarm. If there'd been a spark of life left in Mary, give it time to sink and die . . .

He waited an hour, pacing restlessly up and down. Then he flung open the door. There was still no sign of Rags, but he put the chain in his pocket in case he met the little dog on the road. Then, extinguishing the lamp, he set out for the dairy.

About an hour later a doctor named Osborne was driving from Amberville to Bowton Hill when his attention was caught by the persistent and frantic barking of a dog. He put his foot on the brake.

"The brute's lost," he remarked. "Give me the torch, Andy."

His companion looked amazed. "You're never going to search for a

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lost dog on a night like this? You might as well look for a fishknife in a garbage dump."

Osborne said tersely, "I lost a dog of my own once. Heard him barking, like this one, and thought he was simply after a rabbit and 'ud come back on his own when he was through. The next morning—next morning, mark you—a farm-hand found him with his foot in a trap. The foot was practically wrenched off. I had to shoot him, of course. I'll not take a second chance."

Dr. Osborne went off in the direction of the barking, and soon his voice came booming through the dark.

"Andy, quick! Give me a hand!"

Andy found the doctor holding the collar of a small terrier whose color was indistinguishable in the darkness.

"There's a body here," said Osborne grimly. "A woman. Unless I'm mistaken, a case of murder. Where's the nearest telephone?"

Being strangers, they knew nothing of the box at the crossroads, but Andy recalled the dairy farm they'd passed not long since, and he volunteered to take the car and drive back. They'd be sure to have a phone there.

"Take the dog with you," Osborne suggested. "Maybe someone 'ull recognize him. And tell the police not to waste any time. It's as cold as Christmas, and one corpse is plenty."

"Eh, that's Rags," exclaimed Mrs. Jones, when Andy Foote marched in. "Mary Arthur's dog. She was here this afternoon, poor lass. I warned her about going back alone, but she wouldn't heed. Did you say she was dead?"

Andy nodded. "My friend, who found her, thanks to this dog, is a doctor. I must get the police."

While they waited for the authorities Andy asked, "Has she a husband?"

"Ay, Dendy Arthur. He'll be wondering where she is. Everyone knows Mary didn't like being out alone after dark."

And, indeed, the police had only just arrived when there was another pull at the bell and Dendy himself came in.

"Have you got my Mary here, Mrs. Jones?" he asked. "Evening, Ruby. Evening, Bob. Oh, you've company, I see."

"What made you think your wife might be here?" asked the sergeant.

"It was just a hunch. I saw there'd been a spill of milk in the kitchen and the can missing, and the dog, too, so I did my piece of arithmetic and guessed she'd come here, and maybe you'd told her about Bette Rose." He spoke to Mrs. Jones rather than the policeman.

"She came all right," said Mrs. Jones. "We told her about poor Bette."

He was staring from one face to another. "Well, she's here still, isn't she? Why, what's this . . . ?"

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"I begged her to wait till Bob could bring her back, but she wouldn't be told. Said she had the dog to protect her."

Rags, who had been in the back having a drink of water, nosed the door open.

"Where's your mistress?" Dendy demanded.

Rags stood back, one forepaw lifted.

"It's bad news, Mr. Arthur," said the sergeant. "You'd best come along with us in Mr. Foote's car, if he'll be so kind. They've took your Mary to the hospital, but . . ."

"No," said Dendy in a voice of controlled violence. "It can't be true!"

"True enough, Dendy. Mrs. Arthur has been set on—the same as poor Bette last night, and I don't doubt by the same fellow. If it hadn't been for Rags here she'd not have been found till daybreak."

Dendy drew the dog's chain from his pocket and stooped to secure the little terrier. For once he was glad of the awkward catch, because it gave him a chance to hide his face. When he had finished, Dendy looked down at the little dog. "It's a pity you can't talk," he said. "Then you might be able to tell us something about this chap who goes around murdering women."

Suddenly there was a new sound in the room, a sound so shocking it horrified them all. Someone was laughing. It was the town-bred girl, Ruby Jones. Mrs. Jones caught her arm.

"What's come over you, Ruby? Are you out of your head? Laughing at a time like this."

But her face betrayed no shame. Instead, she lifted her hand and pointed to Dendy and the dog.

"Maybe the dog can tell us," Ruby said. "But there's one thing *I* recall, and Mother here will back me up. When Mary was along for the milk she had that dog's chain in her pocket. She stopped and put it on the dog's collar, and we all saw the clumsy catch. So how does *the chain* come to be in your hands now, Dendy Arthur—*if you didn't see Mary after she left us?*"

They hanged Dendy Arthur for the murder of Bette Rose. One wonders if he remembered his own words as they led him out to the gallows.

"You'll be the death of me," he'd said to little Rags.

And so he was.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS: **Frances & Richard LOCKRIDGE**

TITLE: ***The Searching Cats***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Captain Heimrich

LOCALE: East Belford, New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The case looked open-and-shut, the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming—but there were the cats sniffing intricate patterns on the floor—inquisitive cats.*

THE CAT APPEARED SOUNDLESSLY on the open window sill—the window which had been forced open. The cat was spotlessly black and for a moment, poised there, he looked around the room with unblinking yellow eyes.

The cat looked at M. L. Heimrich, captain, New York State Police, a man most often concerned with homicide, and now so concerned. The cat looked away again, dismissing the man. The cat dropped to the polished tile floor of the living room. Then he spoke, once, on a note which seemed to Heimrich to have a curious insistence. The cat seemed to wait for an answer.

When there was no answer, the cat began to move—to glide around the floor, nose close to the floor. The cat's progress was erratic; the cat circled among chairs and under tables; now and then the cat paused and Heimrich could see his nostrils quiver. But always he went on again, engrossed and, it seemed to the watching man, impelled. Heimrich had never before seen a cat behave so—search so. Search, Heimrich decided after a time, for something he would never find again.

"It's no good, fellow," Heimrich said, and the cat paused and looked up, as if he had understood the words and waited to

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be told more. (Which was, of course, absurd.) "Your man's dead, fellow," Heimrich said, and the cat still seemed to wait. "Murdered," Heimrich told him. The cat waited a moment longer and then went back to sniffing the green tile floor.

Heimrich, having other things to do, walked across the living room, ignored by the black cat, and out of the small, pleasant, country house. It was about four o'clock, then, in the afternoon.

At a few minutes after four, Russell Ashby circled his white farmhouse and sounded the horn of the pickup truck to tell Jane he was home. He ran the truck into the shed which served as a garage and walked back to the house—a tall man in slacks and a jacket with suede-patched elbows. He took long strides on the path to the house and, when he saw Jane standing in the doorway, began to nod his head and smile at her.

It was a kind of pantomime of triumph. But the set expression—was it of anxiety?—on his wife's young face did not alter, and then Ashby slapped his left hip pocket, where his wallet was, to make what should have been evident, clearer yet. But still her face did not brighten.

He walked up on the porch, his footsteps emphatic on the boards. She stepped out onto the porch to meet him and there was an odd rigidity in her slender body, matching the rigidity of her face—a rigidity unbecoming to so lovely a face.

"Got it," Russell Ashby said. "All I had to do was . . ." He stopped; her eyes stopped his words. "What's the matter, baby?" he said, in a very different tone.

"Russ," she said, "where have you been?"

"Been?" he said. "What's the matter, Jane? You knew—" He broke off. "Oh," he said, "afterward. That's it. Think I'd got run over? Went to look at Jenkins's north field. See if it's worth haying. Took longer than—"

"Russ," Jane Ashby said, and her young voice shook. "Russ—Mr. Bailey's dead. They say—Russ, they say somebody killed him. Broke into the house and—killed him. Russ—somebody from the police called. Wanted—"

She did not go on. He held her close and could feel her body trembling. Over her head he looked, flatly, at nothing. And waited. After a time, stumbling on the words, she told him what everybody around East Belford had known for an hour or more. "Everybody but me," Russell Ashby said, his voice steady, uninflected.

Thwaite Bailey, the richest man around, had been found dead by his daughter, who had walked the hill path from the "big" house to her father's house at about three o'clock. She had telephoned him

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first and got no answer, and had been worried and walked the quarter of a mile which separated the original Bailey house from the low, contemporary house Bailey had built for week ends when he turned the old house—too big for anybody, the old house was—over to his daughter and Sidney Combe, her husband.

Margaret Combe had found her father dead in the doorway of his bedroom, his head crushed. She had found the little house, which had so much glass it glittered like a jewel in its green valley, ransacked.

"They think he was taking a nap," Jane Ashby said, sitting straight in her living room. "That somebody broke in, thinking he wouldn't be there in the middle of the week. And that whoever it was made a noise that wakened Mr. Bailey and then—killed him. Russ . . ."

"Yes?" Russell Ashby said.

"Russ—Sid says Mr. Bailey had a lot of money in the house. A—a thousand dollars. That he always had. And—it isn't there, Russ. *It isn't there!*"

"No," Russ Ashby said. "It's in my pocket."

She put hands over her eyes—the biggest ever, he thought. The brownest ever.

"Hold it, baby," Russ said. "Like we planned—I said did he want to invest in an outfit that needed a push over a hump. Because of the way he and Dad felt about each other. I made a pitch, Jane. And—look." He took his billfold from his hip pocket and they both looked—looked at twenty fifty-dollar bills. "I said a check would be just as good but he said, 'Here, son. Take it.' It was—a gesture, I guess. He was always a little like that."

Thwaite Bailey had been like that, as a good many people knew. It was a quirk. Rich men—and men as generous in service as with money—are entitled to quirks.

"Russ," she said, "when were you there?"

"About two," he said.

"He'd been dead about an hour," Jane Ashby said, "when Marge found him. They say that . . . Russ, did anybody see you? There, I mean? Because . . ."

He looked at her strangely. "You mean," he said, "because of that other thing?"

She did not answer. That was good enough, or bad enough. "It was a long time ago," Russ Ashby said, slowly.

It had been—long before Clint Ashby had died and left his son a dairy farm which was now—in spite of everybody's advice—an Aberdeen Angus breeding farm; long before Russ went to Korea in the Marines. It had been before Russ Ashby grew up; when he was a "wild kid." With other wild kids he had broken into a closed country house. "For the hell of it."

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But Russell Ashby had been the one caught—and booked. Clinton Ashby had made good and the charges had been dropped. But . . .

"Sid was walking his dog," Russell Ashby, the grown-up Russel Ashby, said now. He spoke slowly. "On the hill. He was going away when I saw him—his back was to me. Swinging that squire's walking stick of his. I left the truck on Shady Lane and cut across by the path . . ."

Someone knocked at the front door. The knocking was not loud. There was no threat in it.

"Russ," Jane said, in a very low voice, a hurried voice. "Russ—I'm scared. *Terribly scared.* They won't believe . . ."

Russell Ashby went to the door and let in two large, solid men—men not in uniform; Captain M. L. Heimrich and Sergeant Charles Forniss, of the New York State Police.

Heimrich said, "Mr. Ashby?" and then, "We'd like to ask you a couple of questions." Heimrich and Forniss did not wait for more, but went on into the living room. "Oh," Heimrich said. "Mrs. Ashby?" She was a remarkably pretty young woman, he thought; she looked frightened. Which was reasonable. She nodded her head, standing, fear in her face. "Sit down," Heimrich said, and then, "You, too, Mr. Ashby." He waited until they sat down. Then he sat on a straight chair. Forniss remained near the door, standing, looking very large.

"Mr. Thwaite Bailey was killed this afternoon," Heimrich said. "About the time you were there, Mr. Ashby."

Heimrich closed bright blue eyes. And waited. And Jane Ashby, fear rioting in her eyes, waited, too.

Waiting, she held her breath. That was evident to Heimrich—the cessation, utter if momentary, of breath movement in her body. Heimrich looked at Russell Ashby and Ashby looked only at his wife—and looked as if he listened. Heimrich saw Ashby's chest rise, slowly. It seemed a long time before Russell Ashby spoke.

"I was there," Ashby said. "He was all right when I went in—when he let me in. He was all right when I left."

"Yes," Heimrich said, "you were there. Your fingerprints are there. On the desk drawer."

"Maybe," Ashby said. "I don't know what I touched. I've said I was there. Mr. Bailey was an old friend of father's. Of mine, too. I dropped by to see him now and then. He—"

"Your prints are on record," Heimrich said. "From the other time. You know what I mean?"

Again Russell Ashby and his wife looked at each other—looked quickly, then away again. Ashby said, "I know what you mean."

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"The same thing," Heimrich said. "Except—murder, this time. A window forced. But this time—a man killed."

"I was a kid then," Ashby said. "A long time ago, when I was a kid."

"Yes," Heimrich said. "Mr. Combe—Sidney Combe—says you were carrying something when you left the house. He couldn't make out what it was. He was taking a walk—walking his dog. It was about two o'clock, he says. You went out of the house and around it toward the path that leads down to Shady Lane. Walking very fast, Mr. Combe says."

"Most of the time," Russ Ashby said, "I walk fast. Most of the time I take the path. I wasn't carrying anything. Sid's wrong about that."

"Better show him, Charley," Heimrich said, and Forniss went out the door. He came back almost at once. He carried a stick of firewood—a stick about three feet long and a little over two inches in diameter; a stick like a club. "Found it halfway down the path," Heimrich said. "To where you parked your car in the lane. And—there's blood on this, Mr. Ashby. Not a lot. Didn't bleed much, Mr. Bailey didn't. But—enough."

"I don't know anything about it," Ashby said. "You claim this was what I was carrying? You claim it's got my prints on it?

"Now, Mr. Ashby," Heimrich said. "Rough wood. Wouldn't take prints worth anything, naturally. It was used to force the window. The way you and the other kids forced the other window. Then—to kill Mr. Bailey." Heimrich paused.

"Mr. Combe says his father-in-law had about a thousand dollars in the desk drawer. Says he kept it there as—as a kind of petty cash. Mr. Combe's term for it."

He watched. For a moment neither of the Ashbys spoke. Then—slowly, as if so simple a movement were incredibly difficult—Jane Ashby brought her hands from her eyes. Heimrich could see no expression in her eyes.

"He loaned it to us," she said, in a voice which was blank like her eyes. "Show them, Russ."

Russell Ashby looked at her for a long moment. Then he showed them. Heimrich took the crisp bills out of Ashby's billfold, riffled them, put them back, then put the billfold in his own pocket.

"We'll give you a receipt for this, Mr. Ashby," Heimrich said. "At the station house."

They left Jane Ashby then—left her sitting in a chair, with her face buried in her hands again, her slender body shaking again. "I'll be back," Russell Ashby said, and she did not seem to hear him.

That was about five o'clock. At a quarter after seven, Heimrich went into the taproom of the

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Maples Inn, on the main street of East Belford, and ordered a before-dinner drink. He sipped the drink and thought of murder—and of the tall young man at the police station, still denying murder. A stubborn young fool, Russell Ashby was, to deny what was so obvious.

Heimrich sighed. He thought of Ashby's dark-haired wife—was she still sitting so, with hands hiding her face, shutting out a world which had crumbled? There was no good in thinking of that.

He thought, instead, of Margaret Combe, who had gone through a bright afternoon to invite her father over for tea. If it was necessary to think of such things, think of *her* white face, *her* blank eyes. With nobody better, stronger, than Sidney Combe to stand with her.

Combe, the country squire—Ashby had called him that, bitterly, but, Heimrich thought, with reason. Tweeds and walking stick and dog on rawhide leash—and with the seven forty-three to catch five mornings a week to a job in town which wasn't much more than a clerk's job. Well, Combe wouldn't have to go back from this two-week vacation. He could spend the rest of his life walking his dog. He—

Heimrich, who had been looking at nothing, found he was looking at another cat. This cat was yellow. Another tom, from the shape of the forelegs—a big yellow cat standing in the doorway of the taproom and looking at Heimrich, and looking away again. I don't, Heimrich thought, seem to interest cats. The cat came into the taproom and began to sniff the floor. Two cats in one day, sniffing intricate patterns around a floor. Yellow cat and black cat, both searching. Yellow cat and—

"Marty," Heimrich said, through the service window of the bar, "what's he doing that for?"

The bartender looked at the cat.

"Smells something," Marty said. "Mrs. Latham's peke, most likely. Brought it in with her, while back. If he bothers you—"

"Not me," Heimrich said, and watched the cat's systematic sniffing of the floor, watched the yellow cat follow the scent where the little dog had gone. "Does he smell around after people?" Heimrich asked, and Marty shook his head. He said that cats don't care much how people smell. Only other cats, and dogs—

"You don't want dinner?" Marty said, because Heimrich stood up abruptly.

"Not now," Heimrich said, and went to his car, and drove toward the old Bailey house a few miles out of East Belford—toward the house, and a white-faced woman and a rather strutting man, who wouldn't have to catch the seven forty-three any more, now that his wife had inherited a few million dollars; toward a man who would

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be free, now, to walk his boxer on a leash any day he chose—and to take him along on leash when he went to call on people. Toward a man, at any rate, who had planned on that freedom, and might have got it but for a cat who followed a dog's scent around a room. A persistent cat, following a scent.

"I've come to have a look at that walking stick of yours," Heimrich told Sidney Combe, at the door of the old house—told a tweedy Sidney Combe, with his boxer sitting behind him, attentive, in the hall. Combe merely looked at Heimrich. "To see if there are blood traces on it," Heimrich said. "Hard to get blood off things, the lab boys tell me—"

Combe was a fool—but a frightened man maybe—to try to slam the door on Heimrich. Heimrich had a foot in it.

"Now, Mr. Combe," Heimrich said. "That's no good. Where would you go? Your mind was working better earlier. When you smeared a little of Mr. Bailey's blood on the club, for example. And planted it on the path. When you took advantage of the fact that Ashby went around for a loan, and you saw him. When you tried to make it all look like a robbery, because Ashby broke into a place when he was a kid. Disappointed not to find the money, Mr. Combe? Mr. Bailey had given it to Ashby. But that worked out all right, too, or looked like working—"

Combe gave up trying to close the door. He said he didn't know what Heimrich was talking about.

"Now, Mr. Combe," Heimrich said. "A black cat, among other things. Cats can't testify, naturally. But I watched the cat and—I can testify, you know."

Combe really didn't know what Heimrich was talking about, then. Heimrich told him, later, about the cat—told him after he had got the East Belford substation on the telephone and said to let Russell Ashby go and come pick Sidney Combe up. Heimrich followed the police car which had Combe in it only as far as the Maples Inn. He stopped off there to finish his dinner. He started into the taproom but stopped at the door.

Russell and Jane Ashby were sitting at a corner table, with food in front of them, and no great interest in food. They were looking at each other as if, to the other, each was new. They wouldn't want to see him, Heimrich thought. They had each other to look at—and a whole future to talk about.

A future, Heimrich thought, that a past might have ruined, but fortunately had not. Thanks, in large part, to a dead man's cat—inquisitive, as cats are notoriously. And, Heimrich thought, as policemen have need to be, however obvious the truth seems.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	GEORGE HARMON COXE
TITLE:	*When a Wife Is Murdered*
TYPE:	Detective-Suspense Novelette
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*When a wife is murdered, the husband is automatically Suspect Number One. Jeff knew that rule of the game—except that it was no game. His life was at stake.*

IT WAS TWENTY MINUTES OF eleven on a Thursday morning in October when the two detectives found Jeff Winship in Harry Graham's office at Affiliated Broadcasting and told him about his wife. Jeff, who had a deal to write every fourth script for a television series called *Crescendo,* was outlining an idea that had occurred to him on the plane coming back from Boston the night before when Graham's secretary buzzed him.

"Yes," Graham said. *"What?* Are you sure? . . . Well, yes, I guess so." He hung up, his gaze serious. "What've *you* been up to?"

"Me?" Jeff started to grin but something about Graham's expression stopped him. "Why?"

"Couple of police officers are on their way in. They want to talk to you."

Jeff had that much warning. Then the door opened and there they were, one of them dark-haired, chunky, and about his age, the other taller, leaner, and perhaps ten years older, with shrewd gray eyes that seemed to assess the room and its occupants in one swift glance.

"Jeffrey Winship?" he said. "Detective Boyle, Seventeenth Precinct. This is Detective Heinemann. Like to talk to you."

Graham was on his feet instantly, his expression puzzled but his body already in flight. "You can use this room, gentlemen," he

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said, a sweep of one arm indicating the office. "I've got a meeting on the eighteenth floor."

With that he was gone and the detectives gave Jeff their undivided attention. "There's been some trouble at your apartment, Mr. Winship," Boyle said. "Your secretary wasn't sure where you were. We tried your literary agent first and—"

"Trouble?" Jeff cut in. "What sort of trouble?"

"What time did you leave your apartment?" Heinemann asked.

"About a quarter after nine."

"Did you see your wife?"

"She was still asleep."

"When did you talk to her last?"

"The day before yesterday . . . over the telephone."

"You didn't see her before she went to bed last night?"

Jeff could feel the tension growing inside him and suddenly he was nervous and upset, not because he was guilty of anything but because they made him feel guilty.

"I didn't talk to her because she was in bed and asleep when I got back from Boston last night."

"Boston, huh?" Boyle said in the same level tone.

"I flew up yesterday morning."

"Do you remember when?"

Jeff could not remember the flight number but he knew the time of departure; then he was telling the rest of it while Heinemann made notes with a mechanical pencil. He had gone to Boston to see an aunt, intending to stay overnight. Instead he found he could get a late plane and had decided to come home. He wasn't sure when he arrived at La Guardia, but he knew it was just about midnight when he reached his apartment.

"Now what's the trouble? What's my wife done?"

"She's dead, Mr. Winship," Heinemann said.

"Shot," Boyle added. "The medical examiner thinks it happened last night—between eleven and one."

Jeff heard each word distinctly. He knew what they told him must be true, but because part of his mind repelled the statement he could only stare at them while the bottom dropped slowly out of his stomach and he tried to understand how such a thing could happen. Not why, but how.

For in the long moment of silence that followed he recalled in detail his movements of the night before—the darkened living room, the lighted hall, the open bedroom door. It was when he flicked on the switch in the bedroom that he saw her. The headboards of the twin beds stood against the far wall but he had seen enough of the reddish-blonde hair on the pillow to be certain it was Elsie.

He could even remember his momentary panic lest she should

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wake and start a scene before he could snap the light off and ease the door shut. After that he had gone back to the living room, his resentment mounting as he turned on a light and saw the tray with the glasses, the bottle of Scotch, the melted ice in the silver bucket. The ashtrays were overflowing and one held a crumpled match folder. When he saw it came from the Yale Club he had an idea who had left it and none of this surprised him. Elsie had been entertaining someone, had got a little drunk, and must have decided to spend the night in the apartment instead of going to her own place . . .

"What?" he said, aware that Boyle had spoken.

"Your wife wasn't living with you?"

"Not for several months. She has her own apartment uptown."

"But you didn't think it was funny when you found her there in bed last night. You didn't bother to wake her up. How often—"

"Just once," Jeff said, anticipating the question. "About two months ago." He stopped then, the shock wearing off and the confusion in his mind getting worse as he sought some way to make his impassive listeners understand. "My wife has been drinking a lot."

"An alcoholic?"

"No." He hesitated again, wanting to be truthful. "She does all right in the daytime but she drinks too much at night. This other time she was awake when I came in. She"—how could he explain and still make it sound right?—"She said we weren't legally separated and why couldn't she sleep there if she wanted to? I told her if she did it again I'd have the lock changed."

"You think she wanted to come back to you?" Boyle said.

"I think she did it the first time just to annoy me."

"So what exactly did you do last night?"

He told them.

"What about this morning?" Heinemann said.

Jeff told them about the studio couch in the converted study. He said he woke around nine and because he had intended to stay in Boston he had his attaché case with him, with a toilet kit and a clean shirt. After he shaved and showered he phoned Dale Lansing, his secretary, to tell her about Elsie. When there was no answer he scribbled a note saying that Elsie was still in bed.

"But you looked into the bedroom?"

"I opened the door to see if she was still asleep. I thought she was and I got out of there."

"You didn't know your wife was dressed?" Hienemann asked.

"Certainly not. I didn't look. I didn't even—"

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"The Lansing girl found your note," Boyle said, interrupting. "She said she thought your wife might like some coffee, so she made some. When she took a cup in"—he shrugged—"that was it. . . . Who knew you were coming home last night?"

"Dale Lansing."

"How'd she know?"

"I wired her from Boston."

"Why?"

"Because I'd told her she needn't come in today until after lunch. When I changed my plans I wired her to come this morning."

"That's a pretty soundproof study you've got," Heinemann said casually. "Air conditioning unit, double windows, even a special door."

"I had it made that way on purpose," Jeff said.

"If somebody fired a gun in the bedroom you probably wouldn't hear it in the study," Boyle said.

Jeff thought about it and suddenly the guilty feeling began to hit him again. Only worse. The fact that he was innocent didn't help; he knew that when a wife is murdered, the husband is automatically Suspect Number One.

To give himself time to think, Jeff reached for a cigarette and turned to glance down at the Madison Avenue traffic. He was a slender but wiry-looking man in a well-tailored blue flannel suit, a white oxford shirt, and a red-and-blue striped tie. He had good shoulders, thick brown hair, cut medium short, and a longish face that was normally quick to smile in spite of an innate reserve that stamped him on first acquaintance as an extremely likeable man. Only those who knew him well understood his sense of humor, his deep integrity, and his respect for the rights of others.

Now, feeling Boyle's gaze boring into him, Jeff's face was shiny with perspiration, there was a tremor in his fingers and a stiffness in the backs of his legs, for he understood clearly the significance of Boyle's comment.

Jeff had been having trouble with his wife. A divorce was in the making. According to Boyle, he had returned home unexpectedly, had a row, and killed her. Now they were deliberately giving him a way out, waiting for him to say that someone had come in and shot her after he had closed the door.

And suddenly he realized with shocking certainty that no such thing had happened. For the picture of Elsie had been indelibly imprinted on his mind—the way her body had shaped the bed clothes and angle of her half-visible head on the pillow. That her position had remained unchanged during the night had meant nothing to him when he looked in on her this morning and only now did he understand why the two

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pictures were identical. She had not moved because she was dead. She had been dead *when he first saw her*—some time around midnight.

Boyle seemed to decide that he would get no reply. He glanced at Heinemann and the two of them stood up. "We'll have to get back there, Mr. Winship," he said. "You'd better come along."

Heinemann drove and Boyle waited until they were under way before he asked casually, "Who's Helen Mallory?"

A nerve jerked in Jeff's chest and he felt perspiration trickling down under his collar.

"Why?"

"We'd like to know."

In spite of himself Jeff blew up, his reaction spawned by ragged nerves kept too long under pressure and the horrible uncertainty pounding inside his head. When he spoke his words were decisive and caustic. He demanded to know what Helen had to do with the case. Boyle let him finish, nothing changing in his voice.

"Your secretary tried to locate you. She thought you might be with Miss Mallory, so she called her and told her what had happened . . . I take it she's a friend of yours," he said. "You been taking her around regularly?"

"Certainly. I take my secretary around occasionally too."

"How did your wife feel about it?"

"I doubt if it bothered her. She did as she pleased and so did I. I never even met Helen Mallory until my wife and I decided to separate."

"Did you have any plans?" Boyle asked, still casual. "You and Miss Mallory, that is."

"Like what?"

"Like maybe getting married as soon as you got your divorce?"

Jeff started to explain that he had never approached the subject with Helen but because the stubbornness was still working in him he said, "It's possible."

Boyle's reply to this consisted of one word which sounded like: "Umm."

Jeff Winship knew the four people who were waiting in the living room of his apartment. Beyond, in the hall, nameless individuals who dealt with the mechanics of homicide moved unhurriedly in and out of the bedroom and study, but Jeff saw the two women on the divan first. Both stood up—tallish girls, slender, and nicely made. Helen Mallory was four or five years older, with medium blonde hair, while Dale Lansing's was a dark chestnut and worn longer. Helen wore a trimly cut suit of brown tweed, lizard-skin shoes, and a patch of smartly shaped felt for a hat.

"I came as soon as I could, Jeff," Helen said.

Dale Lansing said nothing but

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stood uncertainly, her young face pale and drawn at the mouth, her hazel eyes wide with concern. Before Jeff could reply, Lydia Gifford ran up to him, followed by her husband.

"Oh, Jeff," she said. "How awful for you! I had to come in," she went on, her brown eyes moist under mascara'd lashes, "to tell you how shocked and distressed we are about this. Alan said we shouldn't have come but I had to, Jeff—I had to!"

Alan Gifford moved up beside his wife and sort of eased her aside. "I'm sorry, old man," he said, and shook hands hard, his voice grave. "Anything we can do, just ask."

Jeff mumbled some reply, his mind backtracking as he thought of the confidential report in his pocket. He had not ordered the report or known anything about it until the day before yesterday, but he was glad now that he had it. Made out by an experienced investigator, it detailed his wife's movements over the past three weeks. Gifford was one of the men mentioned in that report and although Jeff knew Gifford had been friendly with Elsie while they were living here together—the Giffords had an apartment in the same building—he had not known Gifford was still seeing Elsie.

Lydia Gifford was in the age group known as fortyish—a handsome woman but overweight and a steady customer of the beautician and masseuse. Her hair was titian, and she gave the impression that she had no other interest in life but her husband. She had money, inherited from a former husband, and she called the signals; a possessive woman, it occurred to Jeff now that she must have had reason to be jealous of Elsie.

In the moment that he stood there, not looking for motives for murder but troubled by his own confusion, Jeff suddenly realized that jealousy might supply such a motive. When he considered Gifford, he saw a similar motive in reverse, for Alan was a big man, soft but still good-looking, and two or three years younger than his wife. An actor of sorts, he no longer had to worry about the rent. He had his clubs and his allowance and his expensive clothes—and plenty of time on his hands. If Elsie, or anyone else, threatened his secure way of life—

Boyle put an end to such speculation by herding the Giffords toward the door and saying that if they would wait in their apartment he would talk to them later. By that time Heinemann had moved up to Jeff with a gray-haired man who wore glasses and had the build of a rangy middleweight. He introduced him as Lieutenant Estey of Homicide.

Estey nodded, his pale-blue eyes busy. "Let's take a look in the bedroom, Mr. Winship."

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Jeff went along, a glance over his shoulder telling him that Heinemann was taking Helen and Dale into the study. Not knowing what to expect in the bedroom he swallowed against a sudden sickness, only to find such preparations unnecessary. They had already taken Elsie away. The bed on the right had been stripped and a photographer was packing his kit while another man continued to work with powders and brushes. Then Lieutenant Estey was taking a small cartridge case from his pocket.

"We found this," he said. "Did she have a gun?"

"A .25 caliber colt," Jeff said.

"Well, that much checks. How long did she have it?"

"She had it before we were married. I think an uncle of hers gave it to her."

"Did she ever threaten to use it? I mean, on herself?"

"No," Jeff said, and then, because there was a time when Elsie had courted death, he added, "She once tried sleeping pills."

"Oh? How long ago?"

"About a year."

"Did she mean it? What I'm getting at," Estey explained as Jeff hesitated, "is that some neurotics try it two or three times, always making sure somebody gets to them in time."

"I think she really meant it," Jeff said. "I just happened to get in earlier than I expected that night and they were able to pump her out in time."

"Yeah . . . Well, this doesn't figure as suicide. We couldn't find the gun." Estey pointed to a chip in the plaster. "The slug that killed her went right through her. That means she was standing somewhere"—he gestured—"along this line. Shot pretty close up. We think she fell here," and he indicated a spot between the beds.

"But she was found in bed," Jeff said, his brows bunching.

"Yeah."

"But why would—"

"We were wondering," Estey cut in. "She could have fallen against the bed or partly on it. The M.E. thinks she died pretty quick but she *might* have crawled up on the bed. We doubt if she could cover herself up quite so neat, and we can't figure why anyone who thought you were out of town would bother to cover her up that way."

Estey let the silence build as they moved back into the hall, then he furnished his own explanation.

"But the longer it is between death and the discovery of a body, the harder it is to pinpoint the time of death. For instance," he continued in the same even tone, "suppose you shot her when you came in. It might seem like a good idea to put off the discovery and let someone else do it ten or twelve hours later."

They were in the study doorway

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then and though Jeff offered no argument, Helen, who had heard this, did. "That's ridiculous," she said.

Estey looked her over carefully and she looked right back at him, sitting erect in her tailored suit, her chin up.

"Is it, Miss Mallory?"

"If you're suspecting Jeff, it is!"

"Why?"

"Because it's simply not his nature to fight a woman or hit back at her, much less kill her. If he hadn't been so much of a gentleman he wouldn't have put up with Elsie as long as he did. Dale"—she motioned toward the girl on the typewriter chair—"will tell you the same thing and she's known Jeff longer than I have. Elsie took advantage of him for years. She was perfectly agreeable to a divorce but she wanted her pound of flesh. She had more money than Jeff but she intended to keep dragging out the whole business until he got his inheritance, until he'd been paid for the television script *Hollywood* bought, and until his play opened."

She said other things and Jeff knew there wasn't much he could do to stop it. It made him very proud when he understood the reason for her spirited defense of him and now, watching the play of light on the rounded softness of her face and seeing the defiant glints in her brown eyes, it came to him strongly how very fond of her he was. He wondered whether he felt this way because she was so different from Elsie.

Elsie was small and pretty and vivacious. She'd had every advantage in a social and material way but nothing inside of her to make anything last or even mean a great deal. On the other hand, Helen had started from scratch. What she had now—a partnership in a small but smart dress shop on the East side—she had worked for with determination and intelligence. And it was Helen who had provided him with the ammunition to fight Elsie's demands for a settlement.

Of her own accord and working through her lawyers, Helen had hired the detective who made out the report that now rested in Jeff's inside pocket. She had presented it to Jeff the day before yesterday with an apology and a sincere request for his understanding.

"Don't scold me," she had said, "but somebody had to do this and I knew you'd never think of doing it yourself. Sometimes I think you'd rather let her steal you blind than give her any argument. You've got to fight her, darling."

He had not known quite what to say at the time, even though he had been grateful for her help. He had also promised to use the information and had called Elsie and told her about it. Now as these thoughts came back to him, he wondered if his announced decision to fight her claims had been in any way responsible for her

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murder the night before. The thought disturbed him and again he was aware of Estey's narrow-eyed inspection.

"Your wife had money, Mr. Winship?" he said. "How much?"

"She inherited about half a million," Jeff said. "I don't know how much she has now."

"You have money of your own?"

"An income from a small trust fund. I get the principal when I'm thirty-one."

"Which is when?"

"Two months from now."

"How much?"

"Somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and fifty thousand." Jeff hesitated, traces of resentment goading him into refuting Estey's line of reasoning. "Plus forty thousand—less commission—for the television play Miss Mallory mentioned."

Estey's eyes opened and things happened behind them. "That's a lot of money," he said. "You also have a play being produced?"

"It's being cast now," Jeff said, "but it may not make a dime," he added honestly. "If you're looking for a motive for me, Lieutenant, money isn't it."

Estey pursed his lips but the straight line of his thought persisted. "Do you inherit your wife's estate?"

Jeff said he was not sure and Estey asked if he knew his wife's lawyer. When Jeff mentioned Warren Adams's name, Boyle turned automatically to the directory and looked up the telephone number.

"Tell Adams what happened," Estey said as Boyle dialed. "Tell him to meet us at Mrs. Winship's place . . . We'd like you to come along," he said to Jeff. "We'll want to go over her apartment and we may need your help . . . Before we leave," he interrupted himself, "would you go over your story again, Miss Lansing?"

Dale straightened in the typewriter chair, her slender body twisting to face Estey. She wore a tailored dress in some off-blue shade that subtly complemented her hazel eyes. Because she was eight years younger than Jeff, and the kid sister of one of his college classmates, he had never thought about her in any other way. He had found her attractive rather than pretty, with a nice complexion and a generous mouth and those well-spaced eyes that were usually sparkling because she got so much fun out of life. In the year she had worked as his secretary she had become an almost indispensable part of his life, not only because of her quick efficiency but because as a part-time companion she demanded very little attention. Now, seeing her glance at him and wet her lips, he tried to smile in an effort to reassure her.

Then he was listening as she explained how she had come in with her own key and found the bedroom door closed and the note Jeff

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had left for her here in the study. She decided to make coffee in case Elsie might like a cup—it was the sort of thoughtfulness Jeff understood so well—and while it was dripping she came back to the living room to straighten up.

"Straighten up what?" Estey asked.

"Well—to empty the ashtrays and take the tray and glasses—"

"What tray and glasses?" Boyle said sharply.

"The tray that had the bottle of whiskey and the glasses—"

Again she was interrupted, this time by Estey. "You mean you *washed* them?" he said, his tone aghast.

"Why—yes."

Off to one side Boyle swore under his breath. Estey glared at Dale and exhaled noisily, for he was thinking in terms of evidence lost and fingerprints destroyed. Yet to anyone who knew Dale, what she had done was characteristic: she'd seen a job that needed doing and she had taken care of it immediately.

Jeff said so. "Why shouldn't she clean up, Lieutenant? She didn't know my wife was dead."

"Didn't she?" Estey snapped.

But there was nothing he could do but accept the fact. He said, "Detective Heinemann will take you down to the station house, Miss Lansing. We'll need your statement." He glanced at Jeff. "Let's get started, Mr. Winship. Do you have a key to your wife's apartment?"

"No."

"There was a black suede purse in the bedroom," Estey said. "The driver's license and the department store charge cards say it was your wife's, but we didn't find any keys. Do you know anything about it?"

Jeff said no and by that time he knew what Estey had in mind. He asked if Estey thought someone had searched the bag.

"Either that," Estey said, "or she forgot her keys . . . Well, I guess the superintendent will let us in."

Elsie's apartment was twenty blocks uptown, a one-bedroom affair that Jeff had seldom seen. It was decorated in pastel blues and grays, much of the furniture being odd antique pieces except for one heavy chair and the divan. There was a Governor Winthrop desk between the two windows and at some silent signal between Boyle and Estey, Boyle started toward it saying he would like to go through it if Jeff had no objection.

"While he's doing that," Estey said, not waiting for any comment, "you and I can have a look at the bedroom, Mr. Winship."

It was then that it really hit Jeff. Until now he had been too incredulous, too occupied with official questions and his own answers, to understand fully that Elsie was gone. Now, seeing the few personal things that had been familiar

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over the years—the long line of dresses visible through the half-opened doors of the double closet and the untidiness of the vanity table which had always seemed to be one of her trademarks—remembered things came back to him in a rush and his mind was suddenly sick.

Dominant in this new emotional reaction was a feeling of pity and futility, not for the woman he had lived with in New York but for the girl he had once promised to love and cherish. For it seemed clear to him now that she had never found the happiness she so desperately sought and certainly the fault had not been hers alone. She had never really known her father; her mother, married three times and usually on the move, had provided for her handsomely in material things—content, it seemed, to let Elsie grow up rather than to *bring* her up and instill a sense of life's proper values.

In the beginning, when he was working on the newspaper, they had been reasonably happy. Two years later, when her mother died, there was too much money—first, Elsie's, then his own trust fund when his father died within a few months. He knew by then that he wanted to write. Elsie had wanted to travel, to play, to enjoy herself. And they had traveled, for nearly two years—the south of France, Italy, Barcelona, the Costa Brava.

During that time he wrote two plays, both bad, and a novel the critics liked and which sold eight hundred copies to net him a few hundred dollars for nine months of grueling work. And finally he saw that travel was not the answer for him, not with the social pressure and the swarms of people that flocked to Elsie like moths to a flame. All he needed was a small room with a door he could close—it didn't matter where—and with concentration and devotion to his work there was less time for Elsie and more time for her to enjoy herself in other ways . . .

Estey was pawing through the dresses—blacks and grays and blues. Beneath them was a long row of shoes in every color but brown. He remembered buying her a brown sweater once only to be told by Elsie that the color did not go with her complexion. He remembered other idiosyncrasies as Estey moved on to the bureau drawers, only half aware of what he was doing until, from some hidden recess, he produced a limp leather address book.

Jeff watched Estey's brows climb as he leafed through it and when he passed it over, Jeff knew why. It was filled with names, addresses, and telephone numbers—of men.

"I guess your wife had a lot of friends." Estey hesitated, half closing one eye before he said, "You're not going to like this but I have to ask it: do you think she was a nymph?"

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Jeff considered the question as honestly as he could. Under the circumstances it did not shock him and as his mind went back it came to him that Elsie had never been a passionate woman.

"No," he said. "I don't think sex was that important to her. If she chased around more than most women it was because she could not stand being alone. As a matter of fact, she never learned how to be alone. She always had to be doing something, to be with someone. I think that's why she drank so much night after night."

Estey nodded absently, and moved toward the living room, still examining the book. A moment later he stopped.

"I see your neighbor Gifford is in here," he said. "Did you know about that?"

"I knew they were friendly."

"I wonder if his wife knew . . . Have you found anything?" he said to Boyle, who was still busy at the desk.

"Not so much." Boyle leaned back, his frown fixed. "It's pretty messy," he said. "I'd take a small bet that someone searched it before we got here."

The rasp of the buzzer forestalled further comment and when Estey opened the door Warren Adams stepped into the room and Jeff tried to recall what he had heard about him.

Adams was a straight-standing man of fifty or so, gray-haired, and distinguished-looking in his neat Oxford-gray suit and Homburg. A lawyer who practiced very little but specialized in personal management accounts, he was a confirmed bachelor and bon vivant whose nightly orbit usually included the better-known night clubs and eating places. Now he moved quickly up to Jeff and shook hands.

Estey waited while Adams expressed the proper sentiments of shock and sympathy and then he said, "You're Mrs. Winship's lawyer? . . . Did she leave a will?"

"She did. It names Mr. Winship as sole beneficiary and as co-executor."

"With whom?"

"With me."

Estey gave Jeff a long level look before he tapped the book in his hand. "We've been going through this. You're in it," he said to Adams and then stretched the truth, "with some comments."

Adams remained indifferent. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I saw her frequently—on business. In fact, I had dinner with her last night."

"Oh?" said Estey with new interest. "What happened?"

"She wanted to go to Mr. Winship's apartment."

"Did she say why?"

"The impression I got—she had a very perverse streak in her when she'd been drinking—was that she wanted to go there more to irritate Jeffrey than anything else."

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"So you took her there. Then what?"

"We had one drink—it was then about nine thirty—"

"Did she know Mr. Winship was out of town?"

"Was he?" Adams's eyes opened wider. He glanced at Jeff and then back at Estey. "No, I'm sure she didn't. As I say, we had this one drink and then she telephoned Frank Cheney, so I got out."

Estey was already consulting the leather book. "Yeah," he said flatly. "He's in here too. Who is this Cheney?"

"A young stock broker," Adams said, and as he hesitated Jeff knew he'd been right about the crumpled match folder from the Yale Club that he had noticed the night before.

"Most of Mrs. Winship's holdings are in high grade bonds," Adams continued. "Cheney had been cultivating her—most assiduously, I might add—in an effort to make her switch to common stocks."

"You mean, he wanted her brokerage account?" Estey said. "Okay. Did he come?"

"I didn't wait to see. She was in a foul mood, so I left."

"How often did you furnish an accounting?"

"Every six months."

"Then maybe there's a copy of the last one in the desk. Did you find anything like that?" he called to Boyle.

Boyle replied, "Not yet, Lieutenant," and Adams said, "She should have the original but I have a copy in my office."

The telephone rang and Estey picked it up. "Lieutenant Estey," he said, and that was all for quite a while.

The room became silent too as things were happening in Estey's face. Jeff could see the muscles harden along the angle of the jaw, the tightness clamp around the mouth as Estey's eyes narrowed. Finally the Lieutenant said, "Yeah . . . Okay, right away," and as his gaze fixed on Jeff, an odd tension began to wind up inside him. It was like a cold hard knot forming.

Estey hung up slowly. "Do you know a man named Harris, Mr. Winship? Ever had any dealings with him?"

"No."

"Pat Harris?" Boyle said, on his feet now.

"A retired cop," Estey said, still watching Jeff. "A private operator now . . . They found him about an hour ago. Shot twice in the chest. The M.E. thinks it was after midnight."

Jeff did not know what Estey was driving at. He swallowed hard. "What's that got to do with me?"

"We intend to find out," Estey said. "Because Harris had a check in his pocket for $500 made out to him and signed by your wife. . . ."

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The building where Pat Harris had a third-floor office was a Third Avenue walk-up, and when Jeff got there shortly after noon with Lieutenant Estey, he found the room even more crowded than his own apartment had been.

As before, the body had already been removed and because this was a different precinct the top man at the moment was the lieutenant in charge of detectives, a lean, long-jawed man named Blake. It was he with whom Estey conferred after Jeff had been told to wait, and when they were ready for him he was aware immediately of the change in Estey's manner. The Lieutenant produced two cartridge shells that, he claimed, matched the one found in Jeff's apartment, and said that it looked as if the same gun had killed both Harris and Mrs. Winship.

Up to now Estey's manner had been impersonal and properly considerate. He was investigating a homicide, which was his job, and he had done so in a businesslike manner. Now there were hard lights in his bespectacled eyes as he announced that a prospective client of Harris's had found the body about eleven o'clock this morning and that the medical examiner's best guess as to the time of death was between one and two A.M.

"Did you know Harris had been checking your movements for the past eight or nine weeks?"

Jeff shivered and felt again the odd emptiness in his chest. He stared at Estey, knowing this must be the truth. He looked at Blake and found the same cold intentness in his gaze.

"No," he said, sensing the doubt and unfriendliness and wanting to defy it. "If I had—if I'd killed my wife and then come down here and killed Harris, as you seem to suggest—I'd have taken his reports, wouldn't I?"

"Who said there were any reports?" Blake said.

Jeff glanced at the manila folder in Blake's hand. "If there were no reports how would you know who Harris was working on?"

Blake let that one go and Estey said, "The way it looks now, whoever killed your wife took her keys and went up to her apartment to search the desk. If she'd been paying Harris she'd have the originals of those reports and they'd have Harris's name on them. But Boyle didn't find any reports, so let's say the killer took them, phoned Harris, and made it sound important enough to get him down here at one o'clock this morning."

"Then why didn't he take the reports—if that's what he wanted?"

"He may have got scared off before he could finish searching for them," Estey said.

"We don't think this is all of them," Blake added, gesturing with the folder. "That check for $500 was marked *Payment in full,*

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and was dated yesterday, but the last report we have here was dated more than two weeks ago. When we finish checking we'll know if he was still working for your wife during the last two weeks."

Jeff could not argue with that reasoning. He could only think about his own movements during the past week—the times he had taken Helen to dinner or to a night club and the times he'd had a drink in her apartment. He recalled too his dinners with Dale Lansing after they had worked late and he had taken her home—to stop in for a nightcap which, once they got to discussing a scene or an idea, often turned out to be an hour or more. He knew how this might look to detectives looking for murder motives. Then, with a sinking heart, he wondered if there was anything in Harris's reports about the three week-ends he had spent with Dale at Saybrook on the Connecticut shore when they had been working on his play.

Would the police believe that he and Dale had been most circumspect at the Inn, taking rooms on separate floors, dictating on remote corners of the sunny beach where they would be undisturbed? Would they believe that he had never kissed her but once and only then in a moment of sheer exultation that came with the news that the movies had bought his television play?

And so he waited, saying nothing, until Blake said, "Let's go down to the precinct house." He glanced at Estey. "He can give us a statement on this one," he added, referring to Jeff, "and then you can take him back to the Seventeenth and work on the other one."

Jeff knew what they meant. He knew it would take a long while, but he wanted very much not to show his anxiety.

"How about some lunch first," he suggested.

"You can send out for a sandwich," Blake said. "Let's go.

It was after three that afternoon when Jeff picked up Helen Mallory in a cab and told the driver to go through the Park and take his time. As he leaned back, Helen kissed him on the cheek.

"Have they been giving you a rough time, darling?"

"Sort of," Jeff said and then, because he had to unburden himself of thoughts too long bottled up, he began to talk fast, telling her about Pat Harris and the reports he had given Elsie. And as always Helen was a good listener. Not until he had finished did she offer an opinion and when she did there was a note of resignation in her voice.

"Well, I can't say it surprises me."

"What?"

"Her ordering those reports. I told you she'd take you for all she

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could. Considering the number of times you've been with me and Dale, she probably intended to name one of us as corespondent—maybe both."

"Dale?" Jeff said in slow amazement.

"Why not? Why shouldn't Elsie be jealous of her? Dale's in love with you, just as I am."

Jeff did not believe it. He peered at Helen to see if she was jesting. "Why she's just a kid," he said. "She's only twenty-three."

"You may have once thought of her as 'just a kid' but if you really put your mind on it you'd know better, darling. To a woman of twenty-three who's in love, a man of thirty-two is not very old."

The statement made Jeff blink and before he could think of a reply, Helen continued, "But at least I'm sure of one thing."

"What?"

"We've got to give the police my reports—about Elsie and *her* dates and *her* boy friends. Dale was the only one who knew you were coming back last night. She might even have gone to your apartment, but I can't imagine Dale killing Elsie no matter what the provocation.

"No," Jeff said with quick conviction. "Not Dale."

"So if we take the men Elsie saw most often recently, we have to start with Warren Adams and Frank Cheney and Alan Gifford. You say Adams was with Elsie last night?"

"Earlier."

"He could have come back, couldn't he? And Frank Cheney was in the apartment too."

"Adams handled her 'estate,'" Jeff muttered, his mind beginning to function. "He could have been dipping into it. If Cheney had sold her on switching her holdings, Adams would have had to make an immediate accounting."

He paused, suddenly aware that a different but still logical motive existed for Frank Cheney. For Cheney was about to marry the boss's daughter and set himself up for life as an heir to a partnership in the brokerage firm of Cummings and Dawson.

"Barbara Cummings has been in Bermuda," Helen said, as though reading his mind. "Suppose Elsie threatened to tell her how attentive Frank had been . . . And what about Alan Gifford? And Lydia?"

"Lydia?"

"Why not?" Helen asked. "As long as we're speculating we might as well go the whole way. From what I've seen, Lydia's a pretty jealous and possessive woman, and she's not getting any younger. She's held on to Alan because she could support him in the proper style. But Elsie had just as much money. Suppose Alan decided he'd like a change. Do you think Lydia would just sit around and take it?"

The reasoning was so sound that Jeff knew it was time to ask a few questions of his own. When he

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told the driver to pull over to the curb, Helen asked what he was going to do. He explained what he had in mind.

"All right," she said, "but you've got to turn that report over to the police before it's too late."

Jeff promised he would, and Helen asked when, and he said before tonight. "I'll call you," and he gave her a quick kiss before leaving the cab.

Frank Cheney occupied one of the four glassed-in offices that stood behind the boardroom in the uptown establishment of Cummings and Dawson. An afternoon newspaper lay on his desk when Jeff walked in and this told him that Cheney knew about Elsie. Cheney came to his feet, a sturdily built man in his late twenties with close-cropped brown hair and a tanned, blunt-jawed face that normally carried a look of assurance.

One quick glance of recognition changed all that and Cheney's sudden distress was at once apparent. His mouth opened and closed, and he swallowed visibly. His right hand moved as if he wanted to shake hands but was afraid to try.

"I—I don't know what to say, Jeff," he stammered finally. "I didn't know a thing about it until I read the paper. Do the police know —I mean, have they—"

Jeff cut him short. "Have they been here yet?"

"Who?"

"The police."

"Good Lord, no," Cheney said. "Why should they?"

"You were with her last night."

This time the muscles tightened around Cheney's jaw.

"Who says so?"

Jeff shook his head. "Let's not kid around, Frank," he said, and then he related what Warren Adams had told the police and of his own discovery of the Yale Club match folder. "You don't have to tell me what you did or when you left but you'll have to tell the police . . . Another thing," he said, and took out the report Helen had given him. He read a few pertinent statements from it.

"You took her out four times in the past two weeks," he said. "You took her home twice and didn't leave until three o'clock each time."

Cheney's tone was suddenly bitter. "You're a hell of a one to talk," he growled. "Every time I see you, you're either with Helen Mallory or that secretary of yours, and you're a married man."

Touché, Jeff thought, but he continued to apply pressure. "If Elsie got in one of her moods and decided to tell tales out of school, how long would you stay engaged to Barbara Cummings?"

"Nuts," Cheney said. "I wanted Elsie's account and I was willing to work for it. With her—*you* ought to know—that meant taking her out and feeding her drinks and keeping her company."

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He dropped into his chair, his manner suddenly weary and dejected. "Suppose I did see her last night? I was out of your place by eleven or a little after. She—she said someone else was coming."

Jeff weighed the statement, wondering just how much of it was true.

"She didn't say who?" He watched Cheney shake his head and realized there was little more he could do here. "All right, Frank," he said. "Right now the suspicion is on me. But I'm getting out from under if I can. I'm going to turn this report over to the police and you might as well know it. I hope you can convince them."

"W—when did it happen?"

"Between eleven and one last night." He hesitated. When Cheney continued to sit there staring sightlessly at his desk, Jeff turned and left the office.

It was after five when Jeff pushed the button at the Gifford apartment and he was glad that it was Alan who opened the door. When he learned that Lydia was out shopping, he came right to the point by telling Gifford about the report Helen had commissioned.

Gifford's full-fleshed body was clad in slacks and a sports shirt. His thinning sandy hair was rumpled and his eyes had a sleepy look, as if he had just been roused from a nap. His florid face grew pinker when he heard what Jeff had to say, but he made no attempt to deny his friendliness with Elsie.

"Sure I'd see her now and then," he admitted. "The way she told it, she didn't care what you did and you weren't supposed to raise a fuss if she went out with other men. Hell, I used to see her once in a while even when you were living here. I thought you knew all about it."

"I had a notion," Jeff said. "The point is, did Lydia know?"

Gifford leaned forward slightly, his lids drooping. "I don't get it," he said. "Do you think *I* killed her?"

"Somebody did. The way it looks, somebody came to my place last night and had a row with her. The police think she was killed with her own gun . . . I'm not accusing you of anything," Jeff went on, "but you've got a pretty nice thing here." He gestured with one hand to include not only the apartment but Gifford's whole way of life. "Where would you be if Lydia kicked you out?"

Gifford's face darkened and his reply was profane. "It would take more than that to make her kick me out."

"Maybe," Jeff said. "It would depend on how convincing you could make it."

The click of a lock stopped him and a moment later Lydia came in, shedding her mink jacket and packages as she came toward them.

"Hello, Jeff," she said. "Have you

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any news?" She stopped to look at her husband. "Haven't you even offered him a drink?—he sure must need one by now. No, never mind, I'll do it myself."

She hurried off, hips swinging, and as Jeff watched her it occurred to him that at one time her figure must have been spectacular. He had heard she had been married and divorced while working as a show girl in musical comedies. Later, when she was getting a small singing bit now and then, she had met and married an older man named Vincent, who had the money to indulge her and more than compensate her for the loss of a somewhat doubtful career. Since Jeff had known Lydia it was she who did the indulging and Gifford had become her career, and, recalling the things Helen had said, he agreed that Lydia would certainly battle anyone who threatened her well-ordered happiness . . .

"What?" he said as his mind snapped back.

Gifford cleared his throat, an unusual pallor tinting his puffy face and a worried look in his pale eyes.

"I said, do you have to tell Lydia?"

Jeff thought it over and said no. "I'm not going to tell her anything, Alan," he said, "but I can't hold out this report any longer. What the police do with it is up to them."

He rose as Lydia came back with a tray and three highballs. He took one, though he would have preferred to leave, and stood by while Lydia chattered on, asking what the police were doing and what Jeff was going to do about the funeral. She was still at it as the buzzer sounded and she moved into the foyer and opened the door.

"Oh—" she said before Jeff could see the caller. "It's Lieutenant Estey, isn't it? Come in, Lieutenant."

Estey walked in slowly, hat in hand, his bespectacled gaze showing no visible surprise at seeing Jeff. He refused the drink that Lydia offered to make for him and said he would like to ask a few more questions.

"Were you here last night, Mrs. Gifford?"

"Yes."

"All evening?"

"That's right."

"Did you see Mrs. Winship at any time?"

For a moment Lydia seemed to hesitate, but her gaze remained fixed as she replied, "No, I did not."

"What about you, Mr. Gifford?"

"I was at the Lambs," Gifford said. "I got back here about eleven thirty."

"You didn't go out after that?"

"He most certainly did not," Lydia said, and she might have said more if the telephone had not

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rung. She gave it a look of annoyance, as though resenting the interruption, but she answered it. A moment later she offered it to Jeff. "For you," she said.

The voice he heard was jerky and taut with strain as Dale Lansing said, "Jeff? I've been trying to get you all over. If you can't talk, just listen, please. I must see you. Right away. Can you pick me up at my place in fifteen minutes?"

The urgency of her words set up a chain reaction in Jeff's thoughts and he hoped it did not show in his face. "I guess so," he said as calmly as he could. "Sure . . . Okay."

He replaced the telephone deliberately and by that time he was ready for Estey. "Do you need me for anything, Lieutenant?"

Estey gave him a moment of thoughtful inspection, while Jeff held his breath; then, with the faintest of shrugs, the Lieutenant said, "Not just now. Where'll you be later?"

"At my place," Jeff said. "If it's all right to use it now."

"It's all right," Estey said. "We're finished with it."

Dale Lansing was waiting at the curb when Jeff's taxi stopped in front of her and she glanced furtively up and down the street before scrambling in beside him.

"Tell him anything," she whispered, nodding toward the driver.

Jeff told the man to go over to Fifth and start downtown and now he could feel her hand tremble as she put it on his arm and leaned closer to him.

"All right, Dale," he said. "Take it easy. What's the matter?"

Again she glanced at the driver, keeping her voice low so he could not hear. "I'm scared," she said.

"Of what?"

"The police. I've been sitting at my place waiting for them to come and wondering why they didn't and finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't think I'd have to tell anyone I was there last night and then I remembered the man in the downstairs hall and—"

"Wait a minute," Jeff cut in sharply. "You went *where* last night?"

"To your apartment."

"When?"

"I think it was about twenty minutes of twelve."

Jeff groaned. He hadn't meant to, but some sharp constriction in his chest forced the sound out.

"Why, Dale?" he asked softly. "Tell me all of it—what you did, what you saw—"

"I don't know *why* I did it," she said, on the verge of tears. "But I got your wire and I knew you'd be tired, so I thought maybe it would be a nice surprise if I came over and had coffee ready for you. I know it sounds silly now—"

"It doesn't sound silly at all," he said. "Then what?"

"Well, when I walked in, the

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living room lights were on and as I started for the hall I saw the tray and the bottle and glasses and the brown faille pocketbook, and I knew Elsie might be there. I was petrified. I wanted to run but I couldn't. I expected her to step out into the hall any second and see me and I knew she'd been drinking. I—I didn't want her to catch me sneaking out, because I hadn't done anything wrong. I still had your telegram and somehow it seemed important that I be completely honest about it."

She swallowed and went on, "I thought I'd speak to her and tell her why I came and then get out. I saw the light on in the bedroom and the door ajar. Maybe I should have left then but I didn't. I knocked and called her name. When there was no answer I glanced in and she was in bed and I was so grateful—I thought she'd passed out—that I backed away and ran."

Jeff discovered he had been holding his breath and let it out slowly. "What about the man?"

"He was just getting out of the elevator downstairs when I came in. I've seen him in the building before and I think he recognized me. The police are sure to talk to him, aren't they?"

Jeff found he could not lie to her. "Probably," he said, and as he sought some way to reassure her, he heard her say, "There was another man. I don't suppose it's important but he didn't look as if he lived there."

"Wait a minute," Jeff said, trying to keep up with her. "What other man are you talking about?"

"I think he was waiting for a taxi, she said. "He was standing near the entrance to the apartment building and when he saw my cab arriving, he stepped out and waved. I got a pretty good look at him while he waited for me to pay the driver. He was bareheaded, sort of shaggy, and his clothes were different—that's why I thought he didn't live in your apartment house. He looked more like an artist or a musician. Do you think if we found him he might help? And wouldn't the taxi driver know where he took him? Don't drivers have to keep a record of their calls?"

"They have a trip card," Jeff said, "but how—"

"I know his name."

"Whose name?"

"The driver's. Remember the character you had in the script you did two weeks ago? The truck driver? You called him McCleery and that's what this man's name was—Thomas McCleery. I noticed it because I always look at those cards they have in taxis. And this said Thomas McCleery. And I noticed it was a company cab," she said, and told him the name of the company.

Jeff was talking to the present driver even before Dale finished.

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He told him to stop at the nearest drug store and when, a minute or so later, they stopped, he paid the fare and hustled Dale into the store, nudging her toward the soda fountain.

"Get yourself a drink of something," he said, then turned to the nearest telephone booth, excitement kindling his thoughts.

Because time seemed so important he decided to enlist the help of a newspaper friend, and after explaining his problem and getting a pledge of secrecy Jeff sat there in the closed booth to protect his priority to the use of the phone. He could feel his pores open up as the minutes dragged on and the stuffiness increased. Finally, after sitting with his back to the door for what seemed an eternity, the ring came.

"I told the company one of our reporters thought he left a brief case in that cab," his newspaper friend said. "The man you want rode from your address to the Club Rocc'o. I don't know the street but it's not far from Sheridan Square, in Greenwich Village. No doubt about it, Jeff, he's the man you're looking for."

(continued on page 97)

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ANTON CHEKHOV**

TITLE: ***Hush-a-bye, My Baby***

TYPE: Crime-Horror Story

LOCALE: Russia

TIME: Early Twentieth Century

COMMENTS: *Most of us think of the baby-sitting problem as a phenomenon of contemporary civilization. Well, here is the way one of the great masters of the short story treated this theme at least 36 years ago . . . with all the Chekhov magic.*

NIGHT. VARKA, THE LITTLE NURSE, a girl of thirteen, is rocking the cradle and humming hardly audibly:

Hush-a-bye, my baby wee,
While I sing a song for thee.

A little green lamp is burning before the ikon; there is a string stretched from one end of the room to the other, on which baby clothes and a pair of big black trousers are hanging. There is a big patch of green on the ceiling from the ikon lamp, and the baby clothes and the trousers throw long shadows on the stove, on the cradle, and on Varka. . . . When the lamp begins to flicker, the green patch and the shadows come to life, and are set in motion, as though by the wind. It is stuffy. There is a smell of cabbage soup, and of the inside of a boot-shop.

The baby is crying. For a long while he has been hoarse and exhausted with crying; but he still goes on screaming, and there is no knowing when he will stop. And Varka is sleepy. Her eyes are glued together, her head droops, her neck aches. She cannot move her eyelids or her lips, and she feels as though her face is dried and wooden, as though her head has become as small as the head of a pin.

"Hush-a-bye, my baby wee," she hums, "while I cook the groats for thee. . . ."

A cricket is churring in the stove.

From "The Cook's Wedding," © 1922 by the Macmillan Company; copyright renewed 1950 by David Garnett; originally titled "Sleepy"

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Through the door in the next room the master and the apprentice Afanasy are snoring. . . . The cradle creaks plaintively, Varka murmurs — and it all blends into that soothing music of the night to which it is so sweet to listen, when one is lying in bed. Now that music is merely irritating and oppressive, because it goads her to sleep; and she must not sleep; if Varka — God forbid! — should fall asleep, her master and mistress would beat her.

The lamp flickers. The patch of green and the shadows are set in motion, forcing themselves on Varka's fixed, half-open eyes, and in her half slumbering brain are fashioned into misty visions. She sees dark clouds chasing one another over the sky, and screaming like the baby. But then the wind blows, the clouds are gone, and Varka sees a broad high road covered with liquid mud; along the high road stretch files of wagons, while people with wallets on their backs are trudging along and shadows flit backward and forward; on both sides she can see forests through the cold harsh mist. All at once the people with their wallets and their shadows fall on the ground in the liquid mud. "What is that for?" Varka asks. "To sleep, to sleep!" they answer her. And they fall sound asleep, and sleep sweetly, while crows and magpies sit on the telegraph wires, scream like the baby, and try to wake them.

"Hush-a-bye, my baby wee, and I will sing a song to thee," murmurs Varka, and now she sees herself in a dark stuffy hut.

Her dead father, Yefim Stepanov, is tossing from side to side on the floor. She does not see him, but she hears him moaning and rolling on the floor from pain. "His guts have burst," as he says; the pain is so violent that he cannot utter a single word, and can only draw in his breath and clack his teeth like the rattling of a drum: "Boo — boo — boo — boo — . . ."

Her mother, Pelageya, has run to the master's house to say that Yefim is dying. She has been gone a long time, and ought to be back. Varka lies awake on the stove, and hears her father's "Boo — boo — boo" And then she hears someone has driven up to the hut. It is a young doctor from the town, who has been sent from the big house where he is staying on a visit. The doctor comes into the hut; he cannot be seen in the darkness, but he can be heard rattling the door.

"Light a candle," he says.

"Boo — boo —" answers Yefim.

Pelageya rushes to the stove and begins looking for the broken pot with the matches. A minute passes in silence. The doctor, feeling in his pocket, lights a match.

"In a minute, sir, in a minute," says Pelageya. She rushes out of the hut, and soon afterward comes back with a bit of candle.

Yefim's cheeks are rosy and his eyes are shining, and there is a peculiar keenness in his glance, as though

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he were seeing right through the hut and the doctor.

"Come, what is it? What are you thinking about?" says the doctor, bending down to him. "Aha! Have you had this long?"

"What? Dying, your honor, my hour has come. . . . I am not to stay among the living. . . ."

"Nonsense! We will cure you."

The doctor spends a quarter of an hour over Yefim, then he gets up.

"I can do nothing. You must go into the hospital, there they will operate on you. Go at once. . . . You must go! It's rather late, they will all be asleep in the hospital, but that doesn't matter, I will give you a note. Do you hear?"

"Kind sir, but what can he go in?" says Pelageya. "We have no horse."

"Never mind. I'll ask your master, he'll let you have a horse."

The doctor goes away, the candle goes out, and again there is the sound of "Boo — boo — boo —" Half an hour later someone drives up to the hut. A cart has been sent to take Yefim to the hospital. He gets ready and goes . . .

But now it is a clear bright morning. Pelageya is not at home; she has gone to the hospital to find what is being done to Yefim. Somewhere there is a baby crying, and Varka hears someone singing with her own voice:

"Hush-a-bye, my baby wee, I will sing a song to thee."

Pelageya comes back; she crosses herself and whispers:

"They put him to rights in the night, but toward morning he gave up his soul to God. . . . The Kingdom of Heaven be his and peace everlasting. . . . They say he was taken too late. . . . He ought to have gone sooner . . ."

Varka goes out into the road and cries there, but all at once someone hits her on the back of the head so hard that her forehead knocks against a birch tree. She raises her eyes, and sees facing her, her master, the shoemaker.

"What are you about, you scabby slut?" he says. "The child is crying, and you are asleep!"

He gives her a sharp slap behind the ear, and she shakes her head, rocks the cradle, and murmurs her song. The green patch and the shadows from the trousers and the baby clothes move up and down, nod to her, and soon take possession of her brain again. Again she sees the high road covered with liquid mud. The people with wallets on their backs and the shadows have lain down and are fast asleep. Looking at them, Varka has a passionate longing for sleep; she would lie down with enjoyment, but her mother Pelageya is walking beside her, hurrying her on.

"Give the baby here!" a familiar voice cries. "Give the baby here!" the same voice repeats, this time harshly and angrily. "Are you asleep, you wretched girl?"

Varka jumps up, and looking round grasps what is the matter: there is no high road, no Pelageya, no people

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meeting them; there is only her mistress, who has come to feed the baby, and is standing in the middle of the room. While the stout, broad-shouldered woman nurses the child and soothes it, Varka stands looking at her and waiting till she has done. And outside the windows the air is already turning blue, the shadows and the green patch on the ceiling are visibly growing pale, it will soon be morning.

"Take him," says her mistress, buttoning up her chemise over her bosom. "He is crying. He must be bewitched."

Varka takes the baby, puts him in the cradle, and begins rocking it again. The green patch and the shadows gradually disappear, and now there is nothing to force itself on her eyes and cloud her brain. But she is as sleepy as before — fearfully sleepy! Varka lays her head on the edge of the cradle, and rocks her whole body to overcome her sleepiness, but yet her eyes are glued together, and her head is heavy.

"Varka, heat the stove!" she hears the master's voice through the door.

So it is time to get up and set to work. Varka leaves the cradle, and runs to the shed for firewood. She is glad. When one moves and runs about, one is not so sleepy as when one is sitting down. She brings the wood, heats the stove, and feels that her wooden face is getting supple again, her thoughts are clearer.

"Varka, set the samovar!" shouts her mistress.

Varka splits a piece of wood, but has scarcely time to light the splinters and put them in the samovar, when she hears a fresh order:

"Varka, wash the steps outside! I am ashamed for customers to see them!"

Varka washes the steps, sweeps and dusts the rooms, then heats another stove and runs to the shop. There is a great deal of work: she hasn't one minute free.

But nothing is so hard as standing in the same place at the kitchen table peeling potatoes. Her head droops over the table, the potatoes dance before her eyes, the knife tumbles out of her hand while her fat, angry mistress is moving about near her with her sleeves tucked up, talking so loud that it makes a ringing in Varka's ears. It is agonizing, too, to wait at dinner, to wash, to sew; there are minutes when she longs to flop onto the floor regardless of everything, and to sleep.

The day passes. Seeing the windows getting dark, Varka presses her temples that feel as though they were made of wood, and smiles, though she does not know why. The dusk of evening caresses her eyes that will hardly keep open, and promises her sound sleep soon. In the evening visitors come.

"Varka, set the samovar!" shouts her mistress.

The samovar is a little one, and before the visitors have drunk all the tea they want, she has to heat it five times. After tea Varka stands for the

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whole hour on the same spot, looking at the visitors, and waiting for orders.

"Varka, fetch some vodka! Varka, where's the corkscrew? Varka, clean a herring!"

But now, at last, the visitors have gone. The lights are put out, the master and mistress go to bed.

"Varka, rock the baby!"

The cricket churrs in the stove; the green patch on the ceiling and the shadows from the trousers and the baby clothes force themselves on Varka's half-opened eyes again, wink at her and cloud her mind.

"Hush-a-bye, my baby wee," she murmurs, "and I will sing a song to thee."

And the baby screams, and is worn out with screaming. Again Varka sees the muddy high road, the people with wallets, her mother Pelageya, her father Yefim. She understands everything, she recognizes everyone, but through her half-sleep she cannot understand the force which binds her, hand and foot, weighs upon her, and prevents her from living. She looks round, searches for that force that she may escape from it, but she cannot find it. At last, tired to death, she does her very utmost, strains her eyes, looks up at the flickering green patch, and listening to the screaming, finds the foe who will not let her live. That foe is the baby.

She laughs. It seems strange to her that she has failed to grasp such a simple thing before. The green patch, the shadows, and the cricket seem to laugh and wonder too.

The hallucination takes possession of Varka. She gets up from her stool, and with a broad smile on her face and wide unblinking eyes, she walks up and down the room. She feels pleased and tickled at the thought that she will be rid directly of the baby that binds her hand and foot . . . Kill the baby and then sleep, sleep, sleep . . .

Laughing and winking and shaking her fingers at the green patch, Varka steals up to the cradle and bends over the baby. When she has strangled him, she quickly lies down on the floor, laughs with delight that she can sleep, and in a minute is sleeping as sound as the dead.

EDITORS' NOTE: *We are deeply grateful to Mrs. Eli S. Newburger of New York City for calling this fine Chekhov story to our attention. If any of you has a favorite short story you would like to see reprinted — or an old tale that has stuck in your mind which you would like to see rediscovered — please do not hesitate to give us whatever details you may remember. We would be more than happy to track down any gem of the past — any story that has been unwept, unhonored, or unsung — and consider it for revival in EQMM.*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**POUL ANDERSON**
TITLE:	***The Martian Crown Jewels***
TYPE:	Detective Story of the Future
DETECTIVE:	Syaloch
LOCALES:	Phobos Station (on a satellite) and Mars
TIME:	The Future
COMMENTS:	*A fusion of the classic detective story and science fiction + a pastiche of Sherlock Holmes + a locked room puzzle that could occur only in the interplanetary future, yet is fair to the informed reader . . . altogether, a clever Martian Nights Entertainment.*

THE SIGNAL WAS PICKED UP WHEN the ship was still a quarter million miles away, and recorded voices summoned the technicians. There was no haste, for the ZX28749, otherwise called the *Jane Brackney,* was right on schedule; but landing an unmanned spaceship is always a delicate operation. Men and machines prepared to receive her as she came down, but the control crew had the first order of business.

Yamagata, Steinmann, and Ramanowitz were in the GCA tower, with Hollyday standing by for an emergency. If the circuits *should* fail—they never had, but a thousand tons of cargo and nuclear-powered vessel, crashing into the port, could empty Phobos of human life. So Hollyday watched over a set of spare assemblies, ready to plug in whatever might be required.

Yamagata's thin fingers danced over the radar dials. His eyes were intent on the screen. "Got her," he said. Steinmann made a distance reading and Ramanowitz took the velocity off the Dopplerscope. A brief session with a computer showed the figures to be almost as predicted.

"Might as well relax," said Yamagata, taking out a cigarette. "She

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won't be in control range for a while yet."

His eyes roved over the crowded room and out its window. From the tower he had a view of the spaceport: unimpressive, most of its shops and sheds and living quarters being underground. The smooth concrete field was chopped off by the curvature of the tiny satellite. It always faced Mars, and the station was on the far side, but he could remember how the planet hung enormous over the opposite hemisphere, soft ruddy disc blurred with thin air, hazy greenish-brown mottlings of heath and farmland. Though Phobos was clothed in vacuum, you couldn't see the hard stars of space: the sun and the floodlamps were too bright.

There was a knock on the door. Hollyday went over, almost drifting in the ghostly gravity, and opened it. "Nobody allowed in here during a landing," he said. Hollyday was a stocky blond man with a pleasant, open countenance, and his tone was less premptory than his words.

"Police." The newcomer, muscular, round-faced, and earnest, was in plain clothes, tunic and pajama pants, which was expected; everyone in the tiny settlement knew Inspector Gregg. But he was packing a gun, which was not usual, and looked harried.

Yamagata peered out again and saw the port's four constables down on the field in official spacesuits, watching the ground crew. They carried weapons. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing . . . I hope." Gregg came in and tried to smile. "But the *Jane* has a very unusual cargo this trip."

"Hm?" Ramanowitz's eyes lit up in his broad plump visage. "Why weren't we told?"

"That was deliberate. Secrecy. The Martian crown jewels are aboard." Gregg fumbled a cigarette from his tunic.

Hollyday and Steinmann nodded at each other. Yamagata whistled. "On a robot ship?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. A robot ship is the one form of transportation from which they could not be stolen. There were three attempts made when they went to Earth on a regular liner, and I hate to think how many while they were at the British Museum. One guard lost his life. Now my boys are going to remove them before anyone else touches that ship and scoot 'em right down to Sabaeus."

"How much are they worth?" wondered Ramanowitz.

"Oh . . . they could be fenced on Earth for maybe half a billion UN dollars," said Gregg. "But the thief would do better to make the Martians pay to get them back . . . no, Earth would have to, I suppose, since it's our responsibility." He blew nervous clouds. "The jewels were secretly put on the

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Jane, last thing before she left on her regular run. I wasn't even told till a special messenger on this week's liner gave me the word. Not a chance for any thief to know they're here, till they're safely back on Mars. And that'll be *safe!"*

Ramanowitz shuddered. All the planets knew what guarded the vaults at Sabaeus.

"Some people did know, all along," said Yamagata thoughtfully. "I mean the loading crew back at Earth."

"Uh-huh, there is that." Gregg smiled. "Several of them have quit since then, the messenger said, but of course, there's always a big turnover among spacejacks—they're a restless bunch." His gaze drifted across Steinmann and Hollyday, both of whom had last worked at Earth Station and come to Mars a few ships back. The liners went on a hyperbolic path and arrived in a couple of weeks; the robot ships followed the more leisurely and economical Hohmann A orbit and needed 258 days. A man who knew what ship was carrying the jewels could leave Earth, get to Mars well ahead of the cargo, and snap up a job here—Phobos was always shorthanded.

"Don't look at me!" said Steinmann, laughing. "Chuck and I knew about this—of course—but we were under security restrictions. Haven't told a soul."

"Yeah. I'd have known it if you had," nodded Gregg. "Gossip travels fast here. Don't resent this, please, but I'm here to see that none of you boys leaves this tower till the jewels are aboard our own boat."

"Oh, well. It'll mean overtime pay."

"If I want to get rich fast, I'll stick to prospecting," added Hollyday.

"When are you going to quit running around with that Geiger in your free time?" asked Yamagata. "Phobos is nothing but iron and granite."

"I have my own ideas about that," said Hollyday stoutly.

"Hell, everybody needs a hobby on this God-forsaken clod," declared Ramanowitz. "I might try for those sparklers myself, just for the excitement—" He stopped abruptly, aware of Gregg's eyes.

"All right," snapped Yamagata. "Here we go. Inspector, please stand back out of the way, and for your life's sake don't interrupt us."

The *Jane* was drifting in, her velocity on the carefully precalculated orbit almost identical with that of Phobos. Almost, but not quite—there had been the inevitable small disturbing factors, which the remote-controlled jets had to compensate, and then there was the business of landing her. The team got a fix and were frantically busy.

In free fall, the *Jane* approached within a thousand miles of Phobos

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—a spheroid 500 feet in radius, big and massive, but lost against the incredible bulk of the satellite. And yet Phobos is an insignificant airless pill, negligible even beside its seventh-rate planet. Astronomical magnitudes are simply and literally incomprehensible.

When the ship was close enough, the radio directed her gyros to rotate her, very, very gently, until her pickup antenna was pointing directly at the field. Then her jets were cut in, a mere whisper of thrust. She was nearly above the spaceport, her path tangential to the moon's curvature. After a moment Yamagata slapped the keys hard, and the rockets blasted furiously, a visible red streak up in the sky. He cut them again, checked his data, and gave a milder blast.

"Okay," he grunted. "Let's bring her in."

Her velocity relative to Phobos's orbit and rotation was now zero, and she was falling. Yamagata slewed her around till the jets were pointing vertically down. Then he sat back and mopped his face while Ramanowitz took over; the job was too nerve-stretching for one man to perform in its entirety. Ramanowitz sweated the awkward mass to within a few yards of the cradle. Steinmann finished the task, easing her into the berth like an egg into a cup. He cut the jets and there was silence.

"Whew! Chuck, how about a drink?" Yamagata held out unsteady fingers and regarded them with an impersonal stare.

Hollyday smiled and fetched a bottle. It went happily around. Gregg declined. His eyes were locked to the field, where a technician was checking for radioactivity. The verdict was clean, and he saw his constables come soaring over the concrete, to surround the great ship with guns. One of them went up, opened the manhatch, and slipped inside.

It seemed a very long while before he emerged. Then he came running. Gregg cursed and thumbed the tower's radio board. "Hey, there! Ybarra! What's the matter?"

The helmet set shuddered a reply: "Señor . . . Señor Inspector . . . . the crown jewels are gone."

Sabaeus is, of course, a purely human name for the old city nestled in the Martian tropics, at the juncture of the "canals" Phison and Euphrates. Terrestrial mouths simply cannot form the syllables of High Chlannach, though rough approximations are possible. Nor did humans ever build a town exclusively of towers broader at the top than the base, or inhabit one for twenty thousand years. If they had, though, they would have encouraged an eager tourist influx; but Martians prefer more dignified ways of making a dollar, even if their parsimonious fame has long replaced that of Scotch-

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men. The result is that though interplanetary trade is brisk and Phobos a treaty port, a human is still a rare sight in Sabaeus.

Hurrying down the avenues between the stone mushrooms, Gregg felt conspicuous. He was glad the airsuit muffled him. Not that the grave Martians stared; they varkled, which is worse.

The Street of Those Who Prepare Nourishment in Ovens is a quiet one, given over to handicrafters, philosophers, and residential apartments. You won't see a courtship dance or a parade of the Lesser Halberdiers on it: nothing more exciting than a continuous four-day argument on the relativistic nature of the null class or an occasional gunfight. The latter are due to the planet's most renowned private detective, who nests here.

Gregg always found it eerie to be on Mars, under the cold deep-blue sky and the shrunken sun, among noises muffled by the thin oxygen-deficient air. But for Syaloch he had a good deal of affection, and when he had gone up the ladder and shaken the rattle outside the second-floor apartment and had been admitted, it was like escaping from nightmare.

"Ah, Krech!" The investigator laid down the stringed instrument on which he had been playing and towered gauntly over his visitor. "An unexbectet bleassure to see hyou. Come in, my tear chab, to come in." He was proud of his English—but simple misspellings will not convey the whistling, clicking Martian accent. Gregg had long ago fallen into the habit of translating it into a human pronunciation as he listened.

The Inspector felt a cautious way into the high, narrow room. The glowsnakes which illuminated it after dark were coiled asleep on the stone floor, in a litter of papers, specimens, and weapons; rusty sand covered the sills of the Gothic windows. Syaloch was not neat except in his own person. In one corner was a small chemical laboratory. The rest of the walls were taken up with shelves, the criminological literature of three planets —Martian books, Terrestrial micros, Venusian talking stones. At one place, patriotically, the glyphs representing the reigning Nestmother had been punched out with bullets. An Earthling could not sit on the trapezelike native furniture, but Syaloch had courteously provided chairs and tubs as well; his clientèle was also triplanetary. Gregg found a scarred Duncan Phyfe and lowered himself, breathing heavily into his oxygen tubes.

"I take it you are here on official but confidential business." Syaloch got out a big-bowled pipe. Martians have happily adopted tobacco, though in their atmosphere it must include potassium permanganate. Gregg was thankful he didn't have to breathe the blue fog.

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He started. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Elementary, my dear fellow. Your manner is most agitated, and I know nothing but a crisis in your profession would cause that in a good stolid bachelor. Yet you come to me rather than the Homeostatic Corps . . . so it must be a delicate affair."

Gregg laughed wryly. He himself could not read any Martian's expression—what corresponds to a smile or a snarl on a totally nonhuman face? But this overgrown stork—

No. To compare the species of different planets is merely to betray the limitations of language. Syaloch was a seven-foot biped of vaguely storklike appearance. But the lean, crested, red-beaked head at the end of the sinuous neck was too large, the yellow eyes too deep; the white feathers were more like a penguin's than a flying bird's, save at the blue-plumed tail; instead of wings there were skinny red arms ending in four-fingered hands. And the overall posture was too erect for a bird.

Gregg jerked back to awareness. God in Heaven! The city lay gray and quiet; the sun was slipping westward over the farmlands of Sinus Sabaeus and the desert of the Aeria; he could just make out the rumble of a treadmill cart passing beneath the windows—and he sat here with a story which could blow the Solar System apart!

His hands, gloved against the chill, twisted together. "Yes, it's confidential, all right. If you can solve this case, you can just about name your own fee." The gleam in Syaloch's eyes made him regret that, but he stumbled on: "One thing, though. Just how do you feel about us Earthlings?"

"I have no prejudices. It is the brain that counts, not whether it is covered by feathers or hair or bony plates."

"No, I realize that. But some Martians resent us. We do disrupt an old way of life—we can't help it, if we're to trade with you—"

"*K'teh*. The trade is on the whole beneficial. Your fuel and machinery—and tobacco, yesss—for our kantz and snull. Also, we were getting too . . . stale. And of course space travel has added a whole new dimension to criminology. Yes, I favor Earth."

"Then you'll help us? And keep quiet about something which could provoke your planetary federation into kicking us off Phobos?"

The third eyelids closed, making the long-beaked face a mask. "I give no promises yet, Gregg."

"Well . . . damn it, all right, I'll have to take the chance." The policeman swallowed hard. "You know about your crown jewels, of course."

"They were lent to Earth for exhibit and scientific study."

"After years of negotiation. There's no more priceless relic on

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all Mars—and you were an old civilization when we were hunting mammoths. All right. They've been stolen."

Syaloch opened his eyes, but his only other movement was to nod.

"They were put on a robot ship at Earth Station. They were gone when that ship reached Phobos. We've damn near ripped the boat apart trying to find them—we did take the other cargo to pieces, bit by bit—and they aren't there!"

Syaloch rekindled his pipe, an elaborate flint-and-steel process on a world where matches won't burn. Only when it was drawing well did he suggest: "Is it possible the ship was boarded en route?"

"No. It isn't possible. Every spacecraft in the System is registered, and its whereabouts are known at any time. Furthermore, imagine trying to find a speck in hundreds of millions of cubic miles, and match velocities with it . . . no vessel ever built could carry that much fuel. And mind you, it was never announced that the jewels were going back this way. Only the UN police and the Earth Station crew *could* know till the ship had actually left—by which time it'd be too late to catch her."

"Most interesting." Syaloch puffed hard.

"If word of this gets out," said Gregg miserably, "you can guess the results. I suppose we'd still have a few friends left in your Parliament—"

"In the House of Actives, yesss . . . a few. Not in the House of Philosophers, which is of course the upper chamber."

"It could mean a twenty-year hiatus in Earth-Mars traffic—maybe a permanent breaking off of relations. Damn it, Syaloch, you've *got* to find those stones!"

"Hm-m-m. I pray your pardon. This requires thought." The Martian picked up his crooked instrument and plucked a few tentative chords. Gregg sighed and attempted to relax. He knew the Chlannach temperament; he'd have to listen to an hour of minor-key caterwauling.

The colorless sunset was past, night had fallen with the unnerving Martian swiftness, and the glowsnakes were emitting blue radiance when Syaloch put down the demifiddle.

"I fear I shall have to visit Phobos in person," he said. "There are too many unknowns for analysis, and it is never well to theorize before all the data have been gathered." A bony hand clapped Gregg's shoulder. "Come, come, old chap. I am really most grateful to you. Life was becoming infernally dull. Now, as my famous Terrestrial predecessor would say, the game's afoot . . . and a very big game indeed!"

A Martian in an Earthlike atmosphere is not much hampered, needing only an hour in a com-

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pression chamber and a filter on his beak to eliminate excess oxygen and moisture. Syaloch walked freely about the port clad in filter, pipe, and *tirstokr* cap, grumbling to himself at the heat and humidity. He noticed that all the humans but Gregg were reserved, almost fearful, as they watched him —they were sitting on a secret which could unleash red murder.

He donned a spacesuit and went out to inspect the *Jane Brackney*. The vessel had been shunted aside to make room for later arrivals, and stood by a raw crag at the edge of the field, glimmering in the hard spatial sunlight. Gregg and Yamagata were with him.

"I say, you *have* been thorough," remarked the deetctive. "The outer skin is quite stripped off."

The spheroid resembled an egg which had tangled with a waffle iron: an intersecting grid of girders and braces above a thin aluminum hide. The jets, hatches, and radio mast were the only breaks in the checkerboard pattern, whose depth was about a foot and whose squares were a yard across at the "equator."

Yamagata laughed in a strained fashion. "No. the cops fluoroscoped every inch of her, but that's the way these cargo ships always look. They never land on Earth, you know, or any place where there's air, so streamlining would be unnecessary. And since nobody is aboard in transit, we don't have to worry about insulation or airtightness. Perishables are stowed in sealed compartments."

"I see. Now where were the crown jewels kept?"

"They were supposed to be in a cupboard near the gyros," said Gregg. "They were in a locked box, about six inches high, six inches wide, and a foot long." He shook his head, finding it hard to believe that so small a box could contain so much potential death.

"Ah . . . but *were* they placed there?"

"I radioed Earth and got a full account," said Gregg. "The ship was loaded as usual at the satellite station, then shoved a quarter mile away till it was time for her to leave—to get her out of the way, you understand. She was still in the same free-fall orbit, attached by a light cable—perfectly standard practice. At the last minute, without anyone being told beforehand, the crown jewels were brought up from Earth and stashed aboard."

"By a special policeman, I presume?"

"No. Only licensed technicians are allowed to board a ship in orbit, unless there's a life-and-death emergency. One of the regular station crew—fellow named Carter —was told where to put them. He was watched by the cops as he pulled himself along the cable and in through the manhatch." Gregg pointed to a small door near the radio mast. "He came out, closed

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it, and returned on the cable. The police immediately searched him and his spacesuit, just in case, and he positively did not have the jewels. There was no reason to suspect him of anything — good steady worker—though I'll admit he's disappeared since then. The *Jane* blasted a few minutes late and her jets were watched till they cut off and she went into free fall. And that's the last anyone saw of her till she got here—without the jewels."

"And right on orbit," added Yamagata. "If by some freak she had been boarded, it would have thrown her off enough for us to notice as she came in. Transference of momentum between her and the other ship."

"I see." Behind his faceplate, Syaloch's beak cut a sharp black curve across heaven. "Now then, Gregg, were the jewels actually in the box when it was delivered?"

"At Earth Station, you mean? Oh, yes. There are four UN Chief Inspectors involved, and HQ says they're absolutely above suspicion. When I sent back word of the theft, they insisted on having their own quarters and so on searched, and went under scop voluntarily."

"And your own constables on Phobos?"

"Same thing," said the policeman grimly. "I've slapped on an embargo—nobody but me has left this settlement since the loss was discovered. I've had every room and tunnel and warehouse searched." He tried to scratch his head, a frustrating attempt when one is in a spacesuit. "I can't maintain those restrictions much longer. Ships are coming in and the consignees want their freight."

"*Hnachla.* That puts us under a time limit, then." Syaloch nodded to himself. "Do you know, this is a fascinating variation of the old locked room problem. A robot ship in transit is a locked room in the most classic sense." He drifted off into a reverie.

Gregg stared bleakly across the savage horizon, naked rock tumbling away under his feet, and then back over the field. Odd how tricky your vision became in airlessness, even when you had bright lights. That fellow crossing the field there, under the full glare of sun and floodlamps, was merely a stipple of shadow and luminance . . . what the devil was he doing, tying a shoe of all things? No, he was walking quite normally—

"I'd like to put everyone on Phobos under scop," said Gregg with a violent note, "but the law won't allow it unless the suspect volunteers—and only my own men have volunteered."

"Quite rightly, my dear fellow," said Syaloch. "One should at least have the privilege of privacy in his own skull. And it would make the investigation unbearably crude."

"I don't give a fertilizing damn how crude it is," snapped Gregg.

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"I just want that box with the crown jewels safe inside."

"Tut-tut! Impatience has been the ruin of many a promising young police officer, as I seem to recall my spiritual ancestor of Earth pointing out to a Scotland Yard man who—hm—may even have been a physical ancestor of yours, Gregg. It seems we must try another approach. Are there any people on Phobos who might have known the jewels were aboard this ship?"

"Yes. Two men only. I've pretty well established that they never broke security and told anyone else till the secret was out."

"And who are they?"

"Technicians, Hollyday and Steinmann. They were working at Earth Station when the *Jane* was loaded. They quit soon after—not at the same time—and came here by liner and got jobs. You can bet that *their* quarters have been searched!"

"Perhaps," murmured Syaloch, "it would be worthwhile to interview the gentlemen in question."

Steinmann, a thin redhead, wore truculence like a mantle; Hollyday merely looked worried. It was no evidence of guilt—everyone had been rubbed raw of late. They sat in the police office, with Gregg behind the desk and Syaloch leaning against the wall, smoking and regarding them with unreadable yellow eyes.

"Damn it, I've told this over and over till I'm sick of it!" Steinmann knotted his fists and gave the Martian a bloodshot stare. "I never touched the things and I don't know who did. Hasn't any man a right to change jobs?"

"Please," said the detective mildly. "The better you help the sooner we can finish this work. I take it you were acquainted with the man who actually put the box aboard the ship?"

"Sure. Everybody knew John Carter. Everybody knows everybody else on a satellite station." The Earthman stuck out his jaw. "That's why none of us'll take scop. We won't blab out all our thoughts to guys we see fifty times a day. We'd go nuts!"

"I never made such a request," said Syaloch.

"Carter was quite a good friend of mine," volunteered Hollyday.

"Uh-huh," grunted Gregg. "And he quit too, about the same time you fellows did, and went Earthside and hasn't been seen since. HQ told me you and he were thick. What'd you talk about?"

"The usual." Hollyday shrugged. "Wine, women, and song. I haven't heard from him since I left Earth."

"Who says Carter stole the box?" demanded Steinmann. "He just got tired of living in space and quit his job. He *couldn't* have stolen the jewels—he was searched, remember?"

"Could he have hidden it some-

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where for a friend to get at this end?" inquired Syaloch.

"Hidden it? Where? Those ships don't have secret compartments." Steinmann spoke wearily. "And he was only aboard the *Jane* a few minutes, just long enough to put the box where he was supposed to." His eyes smoldered at Gregg. "Let's face it: the only people anywhere along the line who ever had a chance to lift it were our own dear cops."

The Inspector reddened and half rose. "Look here, you—"

"We've got *your* word that you're innocent," growled Steinmann. "Why should it be any better than mine?"

Syaloch waved both men back. "If you please. Brawls are unphilosophic." His beak opened and clattered, the Martian equivalent of a smile. "Has either of you, perhaps, a theory? I am open to all ideas."

There was a stillness. Then Hollyday mumbled: "Yes. I have one."

Syaloch hooded his eyes and puffed quietly, waiting.

Hollyday's grin was shaky. "Only if I'm right, you'll never see those jewels again."

Gregg sputtered.

"I've been around the Solar System a lot," said Hollyday. "It gets lonesome out in space. You never know how big and lonesome it is till you've been there, all by yourself. And I've done just that —I'm an amateur uranium prospector, not a lucky one so far. I can't believe we know everything about the universe, or that there's only vacuum between the planets."

"Are you talking about the cobblies?" snorted Gregg.

"Go ahead and call it superstition. But if you're in space long enough . . . well, somehow, you *know*. There are beings out there —gas beings, radiation beings, whatever you want to imagine, there's *something* living in space."

"And what use would a box of jewles be to a cobbly?"

Hollyday spread his hands. "How can I tell? Maybe we bother them, scooting through their own dark kingdom with our little rockets. Stealing the crown jewels would be a good way to disrupt the Mars trade, wouldn't it?"

Only Syaloch's pipe broke the inward-pressing silence. But its burbling seemed quite irreverent.

"Well—" Gregg fumbled helplessly with a meteoric paperweight. "Well, Mr. Syaloch, do you want to ask any more questions?"

"Only one." The third lids rolled back, and coldness looked out at Steinmann. "If you please, my good man, what is your hobby?"

"Huh? Chess. I play chess. What's it to you?" Steinmann lowered his head and glared sullenly.

"Nothing else?"

"What else is there?"

Syaloch glanced at the Inspector,

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who nodded confirmation, and then replied gently:

"I see. Thank you. Perhaps we can have a game sometime. I have some small skill of my own. That is all for now, gentlemen."

They left, moving like things of dream through the low gravity.

"Well?" Gregg's eyes pleaded with Syaloch. "What next?"

"Very little. I think . . . yesss, while I am here I should like to watch the technicians at work. In my profession, one needs a broad knowledge of all occupations."

Gregg sighed.

Ramanowitz showed the guest around. The *Kim Brackney* was in and being unloaded. They threaded through a hive of space-suited men.

"The cops are going to have to raise that embargo soon," said Ramanowitz. "Either that or admit why they've clamped it on. Our warehouses are busting."

"It would be politic to do so," nodded Syaloch. "Ah, tell me . . . is this equipment standard for all stations?"

"Oh, you mean what the boys are wearing and carrying around? Sure. Same issue everywhere."

"May I inspect it more closely?"

"Hm?" *Lord, deliver me from visiting firemen!* thought Ramanowitz. He waved a mechanic over to him. "Mr. Syaloch would like you to explain your outfit," he said with ponderous sarcasm.

"Sure. Regular spacesuit here, reinforced at the seams." The gauntleted hands moved about, pointing. "Heating coils powered from this capacitance battery. Ten-hour air supply in the tanks. These buckles, you snap your tools into them, so they won't drift around in free fall. This little can at my belt holds paint that I spray out through this nozzle."

"Why must spaceships be painted?" asked Syaloch. "There is nothing to corrode the metal."

"Well, sir, we just call it paint. It's really gunk, to seal any leaks in the hull till we can install a new plate, or to mark any other kind of damage. Meteor punctures and so on." The mechanic pressed a trigger and a thin, almost invisible stream jetted out, solidifying as it hit the ground.

"But it cannot readily be seen, can it?" objected the Martian. "I, at least, find it difficult to see clearly in airlessness."

"That's right, Light doesn't diffuse, so . . . well, anyhow, the stuff is radioactive—not enough to be dangerous, just enough so that the repair crew can spot the place with a Geiger counter."

"I understand. What is the half-life?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Six months, maybe? It's supposed to remain detectable for a year."

"Thank you." Syaloch stalked off. Ramanowitz had to jump to keep up with those long legs.

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"Do you think Carter may have hid the box in his paint can?" suggested the human.

"No, hardly. The can is too small, and I assume he was searched thoroughly." Syaloch stopped and bowed. "You have been very kind and patient, Mr. Ramanowitz. I am finished now, and can find the Inspector myself."

"What for?"

"To tell him he can lift the embargo, of course." Syaloch made a harsh sibilance. "And then I must get the next boat to Mars. If I hurry, I can attend the concert in Sabaeus tonight." His voice grew dreamy. "They will be premiering Hanyech's *Variations on a Theme by Mendelssohn,* transcribed to the Royal Chlannach scale. It should be most unusual."

It was three days afterward that the letter came. Syaloch excused himself and kept an illustrious client squatting while he read it. Then he nodded to the other Martian. "You will be interested to know, sir, that the Estimable Diadems have arrived at Phobos and are being returned at this moment."

The client, a Cabinet Minister from the House of Actives, blinked. "Pardon, Freehatched Syaloch, but what have you to do with that?"

"Oh . . . I am a friend of the Featherless police chief. He thought I might like to know."

"*Hraa.* Were you not on Phobos recently?"

"A minor case." The detective folded the letter carefully, sprinkled it with salt, and ate it. Martians are fond of paper, especially official Earth stationery with high rag content. "Now, sir, you were saying—?"

The parliamentarian responded absently. He would not dream of violating privacy—no, never—but if he had X-ray vision he would have read:

"Dear Syaloch,

"You were absolutely right. Your locked room problem is solved. We've got the jewels back, everything is in fine shape, and the same boat which brings you this letter will deliver them to the vaults. It's too bad the public can never know the facts—two planets ought to be grateful to you—but I'll supply that much thanks all by myself, and insist that any bill you care to send be paid in full. Even if the Assembly had to make a special appropriation, which I'm afraid it will.

"I admit your idea of lifting the embargo at once looked pretty wild to me, but it worked. I had our boys out, of course, scouring Phobos with Geigers, but Hollyday found the box before we did. Which saved us a lot of trouble, to be sure. I arrested him as he came back into the settlement, and he had the box among his ore samples. He has confessed, and you were right all along the line.

"What was that thing you quoted

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at me, the saying of that Earthman you admire so much? 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true.' Something like that. It certainly applies to this case.

"As you decided, the box must have been taken to the ship at Earth Station and left there—no other possibility existed. Carter figured it out in half a minute when he was ordered to take the thing out and put it aboard the *Jane*. He went inside, all right, but still had the box when he emerged. In that uncertain light nobody saw him put it 'down' between four girders right next to the hatch. Or as you remarked, if the jewels are not *in* the ship, and yet not *away* from the ship, they must by *on* the ship. Gravitation would hold them in place. When the *Jane* blasted off, acceleration pressure slid the box back, but of course the waffle-iron pattern kept it from being lost; it fetched up against the after rib and stayed there. All the way to Mars! But the ship's gravity held it securely enough even in free fall, since both were on the same orbit.

"Hollyday says that Carter told him all about it. Carter couldn't go to Mars himself without being suspected and watched every minute once the jewels were discovered missing. He needed a confederate. Hollyday went to Phobos and took up prospecting as a cover for the search he'd later be making for the jewels.

"As you showed me, when the ship was within a thousand miles of this dock, Phobos gravity would be stronger than her own. Every spacejack knows that the robot ships don't start decelerating till they're quite close; that they are then almost straight above the surface; and that the side with the radio mast and manhatch—the side on which Carter had placed the box—is rotated around to face the station. The centrifugal force of rotation threw the box away from the ship, and was in a direction toward Phobos rather than away from it. Carter knew that this rotation is slow and easy, so the force wasn't enough to accelerate the box to escape velocity and lose it in space. It would have to fall down toward the satellite. Phobos Station being on the side opposite Mars, there was no danger that the loot would keep going till it hit the planet.

"So the crown jewels tumbled onto Phobos, just as you deduced. Of course Carter had given the box a quick radioactive spray as he laid it in place, and Hollyday used that to track it down among all those rocks and crevices. In point of fact, its path curved clear around this moon, so it landed about five miles from the station.

"Steinmann has been after me to know why you quizzed him about his hobby. You forgot to tell

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me that, but I figured it out for myself and told him. He or Hollyday had to be involved, since nobody else knew about the cargo, and the guilty person had to have some excuse to go out and look for the box. Chess playing doesn't furnish that kind of alibi. Am I right? At least, my deduction proves I've been studying the same canon you go by. Incidentally, Steinmann asks if you'd care to take him on the next time he has planet leave.

"Hollyday knows where Carter is hiding, and we've radioed the information back to Earth. Trouble is, we can't prosecute either of them without admitting the facts. Oh, well, there are such things as blacklists.

"Will have to close this now to make the boat. I'll be seeing you soon—not professionally, I hope!

Admiring regards,
Inspector Gregg

But as it happened, the Cabinet minister did not possess X-ray eyes. He dismissed unprofitable speculation and outlined his problem. Somebody, somewhere in Sabaeus, was farniking the krats, and there was an alarming zaksnautry among the hyukus. It sounded to Syaloch like an interesting case.

COMING ATTRACTIONS . . .

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Readers of EQMM presumably agree with its editors (and me) that the Poe-created "short form . . . was, is, and forever will be the true form" of the detective-crime-mystery story. For us who hold to this belief, the year just past was a notable one, with volumes of detective stories from Michael Innes and Richard S. Prather, plus mixed collections from Charles Beaumont, Robert M. Coates, Oliver La Farge, Mark Van Doren and Joseph Whitehill, and now:

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **THE ALBATROSS, *by Charlotte Armstrong*** (Coward-McCann, $3.50)
This generous volume (over 120,000 words!) contains a short novel from *McCall's*, a novelet from *American* (reprinted here last September) and 8 short stories from EQMM, 5 of them prizewinners—all with the magic Armstrong blend of headlong suspense and subtle insight. A brand-new classic, clamoring for inclusion in Queen's Quorum. [*Agreed! QQ#114.*—E. Q.]

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ERNEST HARRISON**
TITLE:	***Voluntary Murder***
TYPE:	Detective-Crime Story
DETECTIVE:	The Rector
LOCALE:	St. Cuthbert's Church, in Canada
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Reverend Harrison's favorite detective writers are Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, R. Austin Freeman, and Ellery Queen. His favorite serious writers are John Donne, Thomas Love Peacock, and C. S. Lewis. Doesn't that tell you a great deal?*

I AM AN ORGANIST, NOT A PSYCHOLogist, and I cannot explain to you why the idea of killing a bride on her wedding day should exalt me so much.

The scene itself is still vivid. The church is full, of course, because Joan Shannon is the most popular girl in our village. You can hear everyone waiting for the bride's entrance, ready to have that first look out of the sides of their eyes.

Jeff Cormel, the bridegroom, fidgets in the embarrassed way our local boys have. Mrs. Shannon is all set to sniff loudly when she feels it will be liturgically correct. Miss Adams has already selected the most comfortable spot on which to faint. The Rector is poised patiently at the chancel steps. The altar flowers are beginning to show their metal stays. And I am about to move from some idle meandering on the organ into that infernal Wedding March.

All very normal. A typical wedding at St. Cuthbert's Church.

A yellow light shows for a second at the organ console. It is the signal which the verger makes to let me know that the bride has arrived. If she is fussing, he gives me two quick ones—to wait a

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while. This time, receiving the long one which means she is eager, I press the switch to inform the verger I am ready. I sigh heavily, because I do not like Wagner at any time, and this Wedding March of his causes me great pain.

However, I begin it as I always do. The church door opens, and Joan Shannon sweeps in on her father's arm. She takes one step forward, and the normal pattern, the typical wedding at St. Cuthbert's, shatters into tragedy. There is a sharp crack as a pistol is fired, and Peter Shannon is suddenly looking down at his daughter, watching the blood work its leisurely way across the front of her white dress.

I love Peter Shannon as if he were my brother, and it hurts me to see his helpless air as he looks vaguely round for his wife. I cannot begin to tell you how deeply I feel, as I realize that Joan Shannon is dead—because something of me has died with her. But what I would like someone to explain to me is why, loving these two with every nerve in my being, I am exalted by the tragedy . . .

The prelude to murder was played out at the Rectory about six weeks ago, when I was going over the Sunday music with the Rector. This is really the high spot of the week for both of us—an excuse to listen to music together or to talk over old times.

Robert and I have been friends from the days when we studied at the Royal College of Music in London. Two Canadians in the mother country, it was inevitable that we should become more English than the English. In two years we acquired a choice accent unheard outside of Victoria, B. C., plus a complete disdain for any music which did not rise to the standards of Johann Sebastian Bach. We both had a low threshold of pain in those days, when even a Tschaikovsky Symphony caused us anguish.

Our return to Canada saw a return to normal. The high musical standards remained, however, in spite of what I consider an unclerical enthusiasm for jazz which broke out in Robert about a year ago. As a matter of fact, we were sitting silently absorbing Thalben Ball's old recording of the C Major when the door opened and Jeff Cormel entered with Joan Shannon.

"I wonder if we could have a word with you, sir," Jeff began timidly.

"Of course," said Robert. "Perhaps Alan would excuse us for a moment."

Jeff took Joan's hand. "That's all right, sir. We'd like Mr. Phillipson to stay. You see, sir—that is, Joan and I—well, it's like this, sir, we'd like you to marry us and Mr. Phillipson to play the organ."

I could not have been more

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pleased. Most of us had, of course, been wondering if anything was happening between them; and most of us had been hoping it would finally be marriage. If only to spite Tom Strawhill, who thinks all girls are made to fall into his arms, and has about as much character as a full tremulant. Strawhill had been boasting about his expected marriage with Joan for some time now, and I was wondering how violent his reaction to the news would be, when Joan's voice interrupted.

"You *will* play for us, won't you, Alan?"

"Of course," I replied. "And may I be one of the first to congratulate you on a good choice. You're a lucky boy, Jeff."

Jeff grinned. "We knew you'd be pleased, Mr. Phillipson. In fact, Joan and I were wondering—that is, I was wondering—well, we'd be mighty glad if you'd play our favorite church tune."

I prompted him. "I usually prefer to choose my own music, but of course—"

"Well, sir, we know that you have your opinions and all; but it would really make the day for us if you'd be willing to play I'll Walk Beside You. We know you and the Rector are both a bit highbrow, so we chose it carefully—so as to have something classical-like. We'd like it played nice and quiet, if you see what I mean, like Wally Ogilvie plays it Saturday nights at the Blue Lagoon. It's beautiful, sir, the way he plays it. Sort of throbs in your head, and—"

There are some things which prove too much. I rose quickly. "Look, Jeff. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to play for you and Joan—and when I say that, I mean it. I'll see that the music is played as well as anyone can play it. But if you think I'm going to insult my organ with shoddy music like some fifth-rate musician who doesn't know a fugue from an over-ripe ballad, why don't you just bring a juke box into the church?"

As I slammed the door, I could hear Jeff's "Well, what the—", Joan's "Oh, Jeff, how could you?" and Robert's incisive command, "Sit down, Jeff. You asked for that, you know. I understand how he feels."

This, however, is normal when a wedding is being planned at St. Cuthbert's. I need hardly tell you that I was soon back in the study, agreeing to most of the requests, even to playing The Old Rugged Cross because it was granddad's favorite hymn.

The congregation began to arrive early. Nobody, of course, listens to the organ except as a sort of background noise; but Robert hears every note, and his congratulations are still the highest praise I can get in this town.

I can also enjoy myself watching

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the antics of the wedding parties without being seen. The organ at St. Cuthbert's is set in an alcove right opposite the door into the church. This alcove is really a sort of little stage, surrounded by three solid walls, set back under the roof of the side aisle, about four feet from the ground. Where a stage curtain would be, you can see the back of the organ console, which fills up the whole space a curtain would occupy. To get to it, you have to go through a small door and climb a few stairs to another door. As you enter this second door, you can see the keyboard of the console right ahead, just as you would expect. But once you climb on the organ stool, you also find out two things which you would not expect. One is that you can observe the whole congregation from the altar to the west end. The other is that nobody can see you. Very handy.

After a few duty requests, mostly on the sloppy side, I moved gently into Bach, then from Bach into Rheinberger. I can only suppose that the peace in my soul deadened my ears to anything except the music because I heard nothing—no noise of foot or opening door—until a gun was jabbed sharply into my back, and the voice of Tom Strawhill whispered, "Keep playing, or you're dead."

I knew a hundred things at once. I knew that I should have paid more attention to my instinctive thoughts in the Rector's study, when I wondered how violent Strawhill's reaction to the news of the wedding would be. I realized now that Strawhill intended to kill Joan, and that he would probably get away with it. He could not be seen by anyone in the church, and could escape by the little door at the back of the alcove, without being seen by anyone except me.

I knew that in some way I had to warn the Rector or the verger. But how?

I moved into a little Buxtehude fugue. There is something so calm about Buxtehude that I knew my tumbling thoughts would soon settle down. I noticed with a sudden terror that the bridegroom's party were already seated, and that Joan Shannon's nearer relatives were beginning to arrive. I had, at most, four minutes in which to act.

Strawhill's voice made me flinch. "Listen. One peep out of you, and I shoot. Keep playing, and no trying any Morse signals."

Strangely enough, the fear that had invaded the little alcove calmed my thoughts more than the Buxtehude. Taking refuge in Bach's familiar D Minor Toccata and Fugue, I set my eye on the switch which leads to the verger's porch. Passing my hands lightly over the stops, I touched the switch.

"Keep your hands off that, Bub. I know which switch does what. Next time you play any monkey tricks, it'll be the last."

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I felt a surge of impatience. "For God's sake, Strawhill, stop acting like a comic strip gangster, and put that gun away," I whispered. I might as well have saved my breath. The gun jabbed even harder.

By now the bridesmaids were rustling in the porch, and the verger's light signaled that the bride's car was approaching the church. I turned slightly in my seat, ready to make a desperate snatch at the gun. But Strawhill seemed to have thought of everything. "Keep your bottom straight, and keep playing."

I had now reached the climax of the D Minor. Just time to finish, probably, before that Wedding March. Perhaps I could draw attention to myself by throwing some music books down to the congregation below. I even had the mad idea of spitting. A jab of the gun warned me that I must be careful. As I drew the tremulant and Vox Angelica in preparation for the fugue's beautiful close, I noticed the bride's dress fluttering on the porch. I prayed as I have never prayed before. Robert had moved away from his prayer desk, his head in the air, as though he sniffed danger. They cannot begin the service until he is in position. A few seconds of grace, I thought.

The verger signaled that the bride was now ready to enter. All set. "Get into that Wedding March, and pretty damn fast," came the inevitable voice behind me. The bride cannot enter the church, of course, until she hears it. But any hope of delaying the ceremony was soon killed. "If you're thinking of stalling, forget it!" And I knew Strawhill was not fooling.

I whispered back. "I cannot begin until the Rector's ready."

"Okay. When he's ready, five seconds. Then the Wedding March."

As I moved into the slow movement of Chopin's Sonata Opus 35, Robert stood at the chancel steps, his head once more in the air, puzzled and doubtful. Then, with a short swish of his surplice, he had swung round, and was walking quickly down the aisle.

An usher came forward, and Robert spoke. "Ask the bridal party to wait a moment or two, would you? There's something important I forgot to arrange with the organist."

The miracle had happened.

He came toward the door which leads to the organ loft. The gun in my back pushed harder. "Answer his questions. Any hint and you're both dead."

I heard Strawhill move to the back of the alcove, and remembered that the door would hide him as Robert entered. Another miracle would be necessary, after all.

A flutter of white in the porch ahead, and the echo of a giggle. Behind me, the door opened slowly, and Robert stepped in.

"Oh, Alan, my apologies for in-

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terrupting you; but there's something I omitted to tell you. I promised Joan that we'd sing the Psalm. Sorry I forgot."

He turned away, and in seconds I knew that all was well. A loud crash, and then came Robert's voice, "Quick, Alan. Get the brute."

Swinging off the organ stool, I flung myself across the alcove. Robert had jammed the door hard into Strawhill, pinning him against the wall. The gun sprang into life, and a hole appeared in the lower panel. I lashed out with my foot. As Strawhill doubled up, I brought a Victorian edition of Handel's Organ Sonatas down on his head and a choir copy of the Canadian Hymn Book between his eyes.

An hour later Jeff and Joan were married, and Robert and I were sharing afternoon tea with Police Chief Atkinson.

"I guess I'm a bit slow, sir," said the Police Chief, who obviously would have preferred a Scotch, "but I don't know what decided you to go to the organ. It looked like a miracle."

"I suppose it was a miracle in a way," replied Robert, "only it took Alan to perform it."

"Alan? I don't get it, sir. Mr. Phillipson was playing the organ the whole time. I can vouch for that, because I was only ten feet away from him. Unless he switched a record player on."

Robert smiled. "Another cup of tea, Mr. Atkinson? No? I'm afraid there was nothing so elaborate as a record player. Alan conveyed a distress signal to me, and I acted upon it."

"I guess I see it now, sir. He must have played a Morse code on the organ, eh?"

"Nothing so adventurous, I'm afraid. But a distress signal all the same. You see, when Alan drew the tremulant stop, I knew that something was wrong; and when he used it with the Vox Angelica to play the triumphant ending of the D Minor, I knew that he had either gone mad, or was trying to say something to me."

"But don't organists use that Angel thing you mentioned?"

"Well, yes," replied Robert, rubbing his chin. "There *are* organists who are quite capable of playing Ave Maria on a double trumpet. But I was at college with Alan, and I can tell you that he would rather die than play Bach with a tremulant and a Vox Angelica."

"I wouldn't use that damned tremulant at all," I interrupted. "I don't know what's come over the organ committee. First they . . ."

"All right, Alan. At all events, Mr. Atkinson, when I heard this terrible musical faux pas, I then listened very carefully, and the Chopin convinced me something was seriously wrong. I congratulate myself on keeping cool, but when I entered the organ alcove, I was

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ready to deal with any emergency."

"And you both did very well, sir. Heroic, I might say. But I still don't see what the Chopin had to do with it."

"You should have attended to your music at school. The Chopin that Alan played was the slow movement from his Sonata Opus 35. Most elementary organ books call it Chopin's Funeral March. Have you heard of a *funeral* march at a wedding? And, of course, a funeral march suggested death."

"So nobody was murdered after all," said the Police Chief.

"Oh, yes, there was," said Robert. "Alan's Voluntary was murdered—to save Joan Shannon's life."

It is, of course, very pleasing to be a hero in the eyes of a girl like Joan Cormel, even if she is married. But I am still bothered by the same problem. I am an organist, not a psychologist, and I would like someone to explain to me why I still have dreams of Joan being murdered, and why I still feel exalted by them . . .

BEST MYSTERIES OF RECENT MONTHS

as recommended by Anthony Boucher

★★★★ FOR LOVE OR MONEY: the 1957 anthology of the Mystery Writers of America, selected by Dorothy Gardiner (Crime Club, $3.50)

★★★★ ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW, by William P. McGivern (Dodd, Mead, $3.50)

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WHEN A WIFE IS MURDERED

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

(Continued from page 68)

The Club Rocc'o was a basement bistro dedicated to the advancement of Dixieland rhythms, and the framed announcement that flanked the entrance proclaimed to the faithful that Jesse James and his Dixie Six currently occupied the bandstand.

Jesse's photograph, trumpet in hand, dominated the poster, with pictures of his five sidemen grouped round him. It was the face in the lower left corner that brought a squeal from Dale Lansing.

"That's the man!" she cried, and Jeff peered at a gaunt-faced man of indeterminate age, sitting behind his drums, his toothy smile broad, his thick hair tumbling over his forehead. The name printed underneath was Joe Dixon.

A flight of stairs took them below sidewalk level and past the coatroom to the bar and dining room beyond. The bandstand was dark and empty at this hour. There were no more than half a dozen diners, and the lone bartender, who had not been on duty the night before, was unable to offer any useful information. Uncertain now whether he should wait or come back later, Jeff asked Dale if she would like to eat here. She shook her head.

"I'm just not hungry," she said. "I'm going home and make a pot of tea . . . if the police will let me," she added skeptically.

Jeff avoided the subject on the ride uptown but it was on his mind constantly and he did not know what to do about it. In the end he suggested that they stop at his place first, but as the cab pulled up opposite the entrance, double parking because there was no room at the curb, he quickly changed his mind. Luckily the angle permitted him to see through the glass door into the small foyer of the apartment house, and there on the upholstered bench against the far wall was Detective Boyle.

"What is it?" Dale said as he motioned her to stay in the cab. When he told her, she said, "Well, I might as well face it now as any other time," and she leaned forward to give the driver her address.

Jeff argued with her. He said they ought to talk it over first and she asked what there was to talk about, and the best he could do as the taxi turned into the side street was to tell the driver to

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cruise on past the entrance of the small residential hotel where Dale had a room and kitchenette.

He was glad of the precaution when he saw the black sedan parked diagonally across the street. It had no markings, but the radio antenna was suspicious. When he saw that the two occupants were intent on the doorway of Dale's hotel, he told the driver to keep moving and ignored Dale's protests until they had turned the corner. Here he dismissed the cab and firmly eased her out on the sidewalk, holding her by the hand as he looked around for a telephone.

"You're going to spend the night with Helen," he said, starting toward the drug store in the middle of the block.

"No," she said.

"Yes. She has twin beds, and I doubt if they'll look for you there."

"But it's no good, Jeff," Dale said with commendable logic. "I can't hide out forever."

He said no one was talking about forever and he steered her into the doorway. He warned that if the police picked her up now they might question her all night. It would be a lot easier if she had a night's rest and the delay would also give him a chance to get in touch with his lawyer.

"And anyway," he said, "I want to see what this Joe Dixon knows. Now be a good girl and wait right here while I call Helen."

A few minutes later Jeff said goodbye to Dale in the shadow of the cab outside the apartment house where Helen Mallory lived. They stood close together in that moment while he tried to find some words of assurance. An odd tenderness was working in him to a feeling he had never had for Dale before; but then he had never before seen her look so young and dejected.

"I'm sorry I'm such a bother, Jeff," she said, "and I think you're right about my coming here. By tomorrow I'll have my courage back," and then, although she smiled, he saw that her eyes were bright with unwanted tears.

"Sure," he said, his throat suddenly thick. "Sure," and he watched helplessly as she hurried quickly through the doorway.

The ride back downtown did nothing to relieve the depression that had settled over him. He could not get the picture of Dale out of his mind. Not until he had words with Jesse James just before the opening number at the Club Rocc'o could he concentrate on his immediate objective.

Jesse James was furious. He spoke of Joe Dixon in unflattering terms and the reason for his pique was Dixon's announcement that he was quitting the band—had, in fact, quit the night before, without proper notice and contrary to all regulations. The union had been duly notified and a complaint lodged. But James knew Dixon's

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address, and this information was what Jeff wanted.

The owner of the rundown brownstone on the darkened lower-Westside street was also angry with Joe Dixon, and for a similar reason.

"He's moving out, the crumb," he said. "No notice. Pays for the rest of the week and says he's moving. Just like that," and the landlord spat disgustedly on the top step.

The attitude encouraged Jeff to take a ten-dollar bill from his pocket. He said he was glad to learn about Dixon and maybe the owner could do him a favor.

"How?" said the man, eyeing the bill.

"He owes me dough," Jeff said. "How about letting me into his room so I can wait until he comes back."

"Why not?" the man said, taking the bill. "I hope you collect, Mac."

Joe Dixon's room on the second floor was as mouldy as the house itself, its furnishings apparently included in the price of the rent. One corner had been curtained off into a sort of kitchenette, for a small icebox and a gas burner were visible, and there was also a small bathroom, the ancient tub standing high on its clawed legs, the linoleum flooring cracked and faded. But what interested Jeff most were the two suitcases which Dixon had placed on the double bed. They were packed but still open.

There was no sign of the tools of Dixon's trade, but there was a scrapbook on the center table and as Jeff considered his next step he began to leaf through it. For the most part the contents had to do with Dixon's exploits with various combinations; then, as he turned another page, Jeff saw an item that had nothing to do with music and brought a thrust of new hope to him.

A yellowing newspaper clipping showed the unmistakeable features of Joe Dixon and the one-column headline read: *Drummer Shot By Jealous Spouse.* The account said that Dixon had been slightly wounded in the right arm by his wife, a singer with the band known professionally as Margo Hurst. The story, which went on to say that only one of the three shots fired at Dixon had taken effect, was datelined in June, but since the top of the clipping had been cut off there was no way for Jeff to know where this had happened or in what year. Then, as his glance moved down the scrapbook page, he saw another clipping. Dated two weeks later, it said that Dixon had refused to press charges and that Margo Hurst had been sentenced on a lesser plea, the penalty two years, with eighteen months suspended, and three years probation.

Joe Dixon himself stopped further investigation.

Jeff had time to step away from the table when the knob rattled

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and then the door was open and Dixon was inside, stopping short as he spotted Jeff. The girl who was with him caromed off the musician's shoulder.

For another instant Dixon's startled glance swept the room and Jeff heard the girl catch her breath. She was a small, dark girl, pert-looking and very young. Then Dixon stepped forward, taller than Jeff but thinner in the face, his manner casual and deceptive.

"What's the idea?" Dixon whispered. "And who are you?"

"Winship," Jeff said, watching Dixon move over to the suitcases on the bed. He gave his address. "I stopped by to find out what you were doing at my place about twenty of twelve last night."

Dixon straightened, his back to Jeff. For another second or two he stood perfectly still. When he turned he had a short-barreled revolver in his hand.

"Who says so?" he demanded, his voice still low.

"My secretary, for one, and a taxi driver named McCleery."

For a fleeting instant Dixon's bony shoulders seemed to sag. Then he gulped air and the gun leveled. "Okay, dad," he said, in that same whispering voice. "Stand still."

"No," the girl cried out. "No."

"Relax, Nancy! This character does what he's told and nobody'll get hurt. Close the bags, hon, and see if you can lift them."

Jeff watched her hurry behind Dixon and fasten the bags. She said she could carry one of them.

"Okay," Dixon said. "Take it with you. Walk to the corner and find a cab. When you get one drive out front and tell the hackie to wait. Then come back here . . . Go ahead, now! Nothing's going to happen, is it, Winship?"

Jeff heard the door close and now Dixon backed to the bathroom door and reached round the corner behind him. Then he came forward with two towels, his dark eyes wary, his brows furrowed in thought.

"All right," he said, "Down on the floor. On your face with both hands behind you."

Jeff hesitated but not for long. He knew now that Dixon was going to make a run for it with his girl and this in itself convinced Jeff that he had made some progress at last. He had no way of knowing just how Dixon had become involved in Elsie's death but reason told him that Dixon might very well be the key to the murder. He became sure of it as one of the towels tightened around his ankles.

"Who's Margo Hurst, Joe?"

"Just keep cool, dad," Dixon said. "Real cool . . . Now the hands. Lift 'em up a little."

Jeff obeyed, tensing his wrists as a noose slid over his wrists. He could hear Dixon grunting with his exertions. Presently the drum-

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mer stood up, took the scrapbook from the table, reopened the remaining bag, and put it inside. When the girl returned he gave her the gun.

"Just stand behind him, baby," he said. "If he even starts to make trouble, tap him on the back of the head."

Again the door closed and now Jeff rolled on his side so that he could see the girl. Her face was pale, the dark eyes still frightened, the fingers of her free hand trembling.

"You're a very pretty girl, Nancy," Jeff said and smiled at her. "How old are you?"

She watched him for a silent moment. "Nineteen."

"That's too young to get in trouble. My wife was murdered last night—maybe you read about it in the paper . . . Joe was there," he said, his voice quietly persistent. "If you love him you'd better talk to him, Nancy."

He hesitated, watching her dark eyes widen. "If he runs away it's just a question of time. If you go with him, all you'll get is trouble. That's no way to start out with a man, is it? Or are you just going for the ride?" He had her complete attention now. He might even have influenced her if Dixon had not come back to break the spell and take over the gun.

"Okay, baby," he said. "The hack is loaded. Let's roll."

At the door the girl glanced back at Jeff and he smiled at her again. "Goodbye, Nancy, Remember what I said."

It took Jeff no more than five minutes to free himself and when he saw there was no telephone in the room, he walked to the corner and found a drug store. His first thought was to phone the police anonymously and tip them off to look for Dixon; but he discarded that impulse when he realized that the police, while acting on such a tip, might also keep it under cover. What Jeff wanted most was publicity that would make it difficult for Dixon to hide out for long. So again he enlisted the aid of his reporter friend . . .

Detective Boyle had been relieved in the stake-out of Jeff's apartment and the man who now sat on the upholstered bench was Lieutenant Estey himself. He stood up as Jeff entered the foyer, his lean face expressionless and nothing showing in his bespectacled, pale-blue eyes.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"Around."

"You haven't seen Miss Lansing, have you?"

"Not since this morning," Jeff lied promptly. "Why?"

"Let's go upstairs," Estey said. "Let's have a little talk.

In the apartment Jeff said he needed a drink and asked if Estey would join him.

"Not unless you have something soft."

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Jeff suggested gingerale and Estey said that would be fine. When they sat down with their glasses a few minutes later, Jeff reached into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Maybe you ought to take a look at these," he said, offering the report on Elsie's movements to the Lieutenant.

Estey glanced at the top sheet, his gaze reflective.

"How long have you had this?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not right now," said Estey, his manner almost negligent as he quickly scanned the flimsy sheets, then thrust them into his pocket. "We can check these out later, but right now I'd rather talk about you. I'd like to know more about your relationship with Miss Mallory and Miss Lansing. Did it ever occur to you that one, or both, might be in love with you?"

"I haven't given it much thought."

"Suppose you kick it around a little."

Jeff recalled what Helen had said in the taxi that afternoon.

"It's possible," he admitted warily.

"All right then: are *you* in love with Miss Lansing?"

"I never thought of her that way."

"You saw an awful lot of her. What *do* you think of her?"

"I think she's swell. I've come to depend on her. I wouldn't know what to do without her. She understands my work, what I'm trying to do. I can talk to her and she's fun to be with but—"

"How about those three weekends in Connecticut?"

Jeff slowly lit a cigarette, realizing that all he could do now was tell the truth and hope Estey would believe him. He reminded the detective that it had been hot in August. He had become fed up with the city and decided to spend a week-end at this place in Saybrook where it was cool.

"I was all set to go and the car was outside," Jeff explained carefully, "when I looked at Dale straightening her desk and all of a sudden I felt sorry for her. Maybe guilty is a better word. I remembered how she liked to drive my car—we used to go out to the island once in a while for dinner. Anyway I said, 'How would you like to drive me to Connecticut?' and she said, 'Oh, I'd love it!' "

He looked right at Estey. "So we went," he said. "Three times, just as you said. She took her notebook and a portable. The reason we went off on the beach alone is because when you write dialogue for the ear—for plays and TV—it's not enough to read it, you have to hear it. We'd talk it back and forth and that would be pretty silly with other people around."

He stopped as Estey reached for his glass. The Lieutenant sipped deliberately, then digressed without warning.

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"How about Miss Mallory? Did you figure on marrying her after you got your divorce?"

Jeff gulped some of his drink, then stared at his glass, his blue eyes somber and the bridge of his nose grooved. He was not sure how to answer the question, but as his mind went back he knew that Helen had shown him what marriage could be like to a mature woman who was both intelligent to talk with and exciting to look at. For, unlike Elsie, who had to be amused at all times and was quick to sulk unless he indulged her need for fun, Helen had never been demanding on his time. She was always ready to dance or make the rounds of night clubs, but she seemed equally content to stay at home. Because she understood the nature of his work she also understood his periodic silences. She could read or listen or watch television, but she was not a passive woman. She had great vitality and could argue with spirit; she scolded him on occasion, but she had a way of making him want to do what she suggested and if she was ever jealous she certainly controlled her feelings well.

"Boyle—or maybe it was Heinemann—asked me the same thing this morning," he said. "I said then it was possible. How do I know if I'll marry her or not? I never asked her."

Estey accepted the answer calmly. "Okay," he said. "You never asked her. So what do you know about her?"

Jeff took another swallow, recalling how he first met Helen at a cocktail party given by a producer friend of his. He had taken her home and learned of her partnership in a small Eastside dress shop, and a few days later, finding himself in the same neighborhood late in the afternoon, he had stopped in to see if she would join him for a drink. Impressed by her smart good looks and intelligence, he had seen her since then with increasing frequency, but he mentioned none of this to Estey. Instead, he passed along the bits and pieces of background that Helen had given him.

He told Estey that she had lived in a small town out west and had discovered while she was in high school that she had a flair for dress design. She had worked as a model and later, coming to New York, she had worked in a Fifth Avenue department store until she had this chance to buy into a small but established shop run by a woman named Knapp. Mrs. Knapp needed cash and Helen's savings were enough to give her a share of the business and a chance to use her talents as a designer. Then, because he was tired of talking, he finished his drink and said, "That's the best I can do, Lieutenant. If you're trying to set me up for this murder you'll

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have to dig out the rest for yourself—"

"Right now we like Miss Lansing better," Estey said evenly.

The statement rocked Jeff—not just the words but the quiet way in which Estey said them and the unremitting steadiness of his gaze.

"Dale?" Jeff scoffed. "You're crazy!"

Estey did not argue the point. He simply digressed again. "Why do you think your wife hired Pat Harris to check on you? Did she have some idea you'd take her back?"

"No." Then Jeff hesitated, recalling Elsie's moods and idiosyncrasies. "I think," he said honestly, "she did it just to make trouble for me."

"If she made you look bad she'd get a bigger settlement when the divorce came through, wouldn't she?"

"Maybe," Jeff said. "She had plenty of her own but if she was bitter enough—" He let the sentence dangle, then went back to the accusation Estey had made. "Dale Lansing had no motive for murder," he said.

"There's plenty of motive," Estey countered. "She could have been jealous of your wife, or your wife could have been jealous of her. Either way, I think we've got enough for a jury. The important thing now is that we know she came here last night—at exactly the right time."

Jeff had been waiting for this and now he tried to show surprise. "I don't believe it," he said. "Why should she—"

"We'll find that out when we locate her—we've been looking for her since six o'clock. But we know she came here because a tenant on the third floor passed her in the downstairs hall. He's willing to testify that it was twenty minutes to twelve when Miss Lansing arrived."

Estey hunched forward in his chair. "We know she must have walked in on your wife, and until we find out different we say there was a fight between them. Your wife's keys were missing. We think Miss Lansing took them and went to your wife's apartment to get the copies of Harris's resports. We have evidence that a tallish, dark-haired woman was seen going into your wife's place at about half-past twelve and the one who saw her will swear the woman was not a tenant. We think Miss Lansing called Harris from there, made a date with him, then went to his office to finish the job."

Estey paused and Jeff stared back at him, a strange fear building up inside him. Estey had presented his case with solid conviction. A District Attorney could do even better, and once arrested—guilty or not—Dale would certainly be held for the grand jury. He watched Estey rise and reach for his hat.

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"We found the taxi that brought you here from La Guardia," Estey said. "The driver says he delivered you out front at two or three minutes after twelve." He hesitated, as though wanting to be sure Jeff understood him. "Miss Lansing got here about twenty minutes before that. So unless you killed your wife yourself, or unless you were in it together—and it's happened before—you'd better forget any personal feelings you may have for your secretary."

Estey put on his hat and allowed himself a small smile that was completely without humor.

"If you want some advice," he added, "I'll give it to you—for free. If you know where Miss Lansing is, turn her in. If you've got some idea that protecting her is the gentlemanly thing to do, forget it!"

After Estey had gone Jeff made himself another drink. Because he had promised Helen he would telephone her he did so, but he had no enthusiasm for the ensuing conversation and said little beyond the fact that the police were now looking for Dale. When Helen said Dale was asleep, Jeff merely said he was glad.

"In the morning you can tell her I called," he added. "Tell her I said to stay in your place until I get in touch with her."

A copy of his friend's newspaper had been left outside Jeff's door, as was customary, and the following morning he picked it up before putting the water on for his coffee. He found the murder story on page three and he read through it until he came to the bit he had had planted—a guarded statement that Joe Dixon was wanted for questioning. Satisfied, Jeff showered and shaved, then poured his coffee, taking the cup with him as he went along the hall and then stopped outside the bedroom door.

He was never quite sure what made him step inside—he had slept in his study again—but as he looked at the stripped bed and saw the traces of the fingerprint expert's powders, the details of the previous day came flooding back.

The closet doors stood open, just as the police had left them, and when he saw his clothes hanging there he remembered how it used to be when he shared the room with Elsie. He could visualize the dresses now, the long ones, the short ones, the odd jackets, the hats on the shelf, the crowded racks. Then, unaccountably, his mind caught on some sliver of remembered fact and hung there.

He found he was holding his breath. A peculiar sound distracted him momentarily and when he glanced down he saw the cup and spoon chattering on the saucer because his hand was no longer steady.

By then he knew there was something terribly wrong with the

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picture his mind had envisioned. The facts he had accepted no longer supported the premise he had been clinging to, and now, as a new tension began to wind up inside him, he reached for the telephone.

He dialed quickly and in a few moments heard the ring of the distant instrument. He counted silently and with growing impatience—six, seven, eight. Then he hung up and dialed again and when the answer came he asked for apartment 4-E. In the end the result was the same and now, thrusting the telephone aside, he hurried from the apartment, stopping only long enough to snatch up his jacket.

Out in the street he was lucky to flag a taxi at once and as he dropped back on the seat he caught sight of the man in the doorway across from his apartment.

It was no more than a glimpse, for the cab was under way, and had his mind been free to speculate he might have recognized the figure. As it was, with the pressure building up steadily in him, he only knew that the man somehow looked familiar.

The driver was an expert and the lights broke in their favor. In less than five minutes the cab stopped in front of Helen Mallory's place and three minutes later he knew the apartment was empty.

Still not understanding how this could be, Jeff mumbled an apology to the superintendent who had let him in. Then, out of the blue, an alternative came to him no less frightening than his original conviction.

For now he remembered the black suede bag one of the detectives had spoken about and one of the deductions that Estey had made about Elsie's keys—

He was in motion before the thought was even finished, ignoring the startled superintendent as he rushed into the hall and down the stairs.

The killer had taken Elsie's keys!

That was the inference Lieutenant Estey had meant, and if true the killer might still have the keys. This was what Jeff told himself as he came out on the sidewalk and hurried toward the corner, not bothering to look for a taxi since the distance was only four blocks.

Two blocks down and two East, not quite running but moving with quick, long-legged strides. Seeing now the four-story-and-basement building that had been modernized and converted into apartments, one to a floor and served by a tiny automatic elevator. Remembering too, Estey's theory—the time element, the tallish, dark-haired girl who had been seen coming here the night Elsie was murdered . . .

Out front the janitor had just started to sweep the sidewalk. He was a mustached Italian who had never quite mastered his adopted language.

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"Gooda morning, Mister Winship," he said, lifting one hand in a cheerful salute.

Jeff acknowledged the greeting, turning the man toward the entrance even as he explained that he would like to get into his wife's apartment but had no key.

"Sure t'ing," said the man and now they were inside, riding slowly upward to the fourth floor, then stepping into the tiny foyer. A rattle of the key, a turn of the knob, and the door was open. The janitor grinned and shook his head.

"She'sa not even locked," he said.

Jeff said thanks and stepped inside, swinging the door behind him. At once he was aware that the living room was empty. Three quick steps took him to the inner hall and as he glanced into the bedroom he noticed the kitchen door was closed. Not asking himself why, he opened it instantly. Then, even before he could advance, the wave of gas fumes hit him . . .

What he did without hesitation was motivated by pure instinct. Somehow he was moving, his chest tight with fear and his heart hammering. Unconsciously he held his breath as his horrified gaze fixed on the girl who lay stretched out before him, her head near the stove, her face down, one arm reaching above her head with the hand curled limply and her dark hair obscuring her temples.

"Dale," he said, his voice ragged. *"Dale!"*

Then, his breath almost gone, he snapped shut the four wide-open burners. In a continuation of the same movement he threw the lone window high and wheeled, hands digging under the limp shoulders and knees as he snatched the girl in his arms.

It was when he turned that he noticed the small white-topped table and saw the automatic pistol and the keys he knew had once belonged to Elsie. Even then he seemed to know why they were here, but his attention still centered on the girl as he carried her to the bedroom.

He spoke her name again, his voice still tight. He put her, face down, on the bed and leaned close, a little weak with relief when he realized she was still breathing.

He worked quickly, straddling her hips, fingers finding the bottom of the rib-cage. He was never sure how long he kept up the rhythmic pressure, but suddenly he felt her body stir beneath him, saw her head turn slowly. As he took a breath, some movement caught the corner of his eye and when he glanced round he saw Helen Mallory standing in the doorway.

"Jeff!" she cried. "What is it? What's happened?"

For a moment he could only stare at her. Then he straightened, feeling again the stirring of the body beneath his sweat-slick hands.

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"How did she get here?" he said, his voice husky.

"She wouldn't stay at my place. I told her what you said but she just wouldn't listen. I started for the shop and halfway there I knew *something* was wrong. And I was afraid.

"Here!" she said, slipping off her jacket as she stepped forward. "Let me do that. I'll keep working on her while you go for a doctor. There's one across the street—I saw his sign. Hurry, please!"

Jeff slid off the bed. Traces of shock still fogged his brain and for an instant he accepted the order, just as he had always accepted Helen's suggestions in the past. It was a habit hard to break and he took two steps before he stopped, his scalp tight, the back of his neck prickling.

Then he whirled, his eyes ice-cold.

"No, Helen," he said. "You run for the doctor—or use the telephone." He brushed her aside as he leaned over the bed.

He heard Helen speak his name, her tone aghast. She said other things in a voice that rose in its anger, but he was watching Dale, seeing her roll over and brace herself weakly on one arm. She shook the tousled dark hair back from her forehead and her eyes were open, bewildered and sick before they focused on his own.

"Jeff," she whispered. "Wh—what happened?"

"It's all right, Dale," he said, still scared inside when he realized what a near thing it had been. "Here, can you sit up? That's the girl."

He pulled her gently to the edge of the bed, supporting her with one arm. He felt her slender body shudder against him and now, as he glanced up, he saw Helen framed in the doorway, her face stiff and a look in her eyes he had never seen before.

"Why, Jeff?" she said in a voice that was ominously soft. "Why wouldn't you go for the doctor?"

"You know."

"Do I?"

"If I'd gone for that doctor she'd be dead now. It wouldn't take long, would it, if you held a pillow over her face? It would still be death from asphyxia."

He spoke slowly, bitterness warping his words and a deep loathing inside him. He could see the pale spots that marked her cheekbones now, the bright glints in her narrowed eyes.

"Why did you come here?" she said. "How did you know?"

"Your pocketbook."

"My what?"

"Your brown bag—the one that looks like silk or rayon. The one you left on my living-room table the night you killed Elsie. The one Dale saw when she came to make coffee for me. I was too stupid to understand what it meant—until this morning. Elsie wore

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only blue or gray or black, never brown—the color brown didn't suit her complexion. Elsie was careful about things like that—she never had a brown handbag in her life. Yet Dale saw one!

"The police found Elsie's black suede bag in the bedroom," he went on inexorably. "You left your bag in the living room when you and Elsie had your row in the bedroom and you must have still been in the bedroom when you heard Dale at the door. By that time I guess Elsie was dead.

"Did she fall partly on the bed when you shot her? Did you lift her there, not knowing at first that she was dead? It doesn't matter, Helen. Somehow you got her on the bed. When you heard the key in the lock you knew it had to be either Dale or me and you were clever enough to know what to do. You covered her up. You had to make it look as if she had passed out or was asleep.

"You had time for that much—time to step into the bedroom closet and wait. You still had the gun and if it came to a showdown you could use it again. Isn't that the way it was, Helen?"

Then, because he could no longer look at the things that were happening to her face, he stood up, helping Dale to her feet, and asking if she was all right.

"Yes," she answered shakily. "It's just my head now." She searched the back of it with fluttering fingers. "There's a little bump."

Jeff walked her to the doorway, forcing Helen to step aside. They were halfway across the living room when the voice stopped him.

"Jeff!"

The word was a command and for an instant he froze as Dale stiffened beside him. When he turned, the little automatic that had been on the kitchen table was pointed directly at him.

"Sit down, Jeff," Helen said, gesturing slightly with the gun. "Let's talk this over."

Jeff did not hesitate long. He considered the hot bright glints in the woman's eyes and decided they were deadly. He estimated the distance between him and the gun and he knew the odds were high against him.

"Sure," he said, turning to Dale. "What happened?" he asked her gently. "How did you get here?"

"She brought me. She had the gun."

"But how—"

"It was the brown faille bag," she said, as though understanding what he wanted. "I woke early this morning and lay there thinking. That's when I remembered the bag, when I knew that whoever killed Elsie must have been hiding in your apartment when I came."

"You knew it wasn't Elsie's?"

"Only after I thought it over, and the more I thought about it the more I thought it might be

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Helen's. I knew I had to look—to make sure. I waited until she went into the bathroom and then I started searching her drawers—in the chest and vanity and dresser. That was when I found the wig."

"The *what?*" Jeff said, surprised.

"The wig. A black one. It was tucked far back in one of the dresser drawers. I didn't hear her come up behind me—I didn't even know she was in the room until she pushed me aside. And she had the gun." Dale's voice broke. "She made me dress. Then she locked me in the closet while she dressed." Again her voice cracked. "I had to come, Jeff—I knew she had killed Elsie, and that private detective, and I knew she'd kill me too if I didn't do whatever she said."

"Sure," Jeff said, his chest tight as he understood her terror. "She had the key she had taken from Elsie's bag and she brought you here. Then what?"

"She kept behind me. She made me walk into the kitchen . . . That's all I remember. She must have hit me with the gun but I don't remember it."

He nodded, understanding Helen's full plan. She had forced Dale to come here at gunpoint not only because she dared not fake a suicide in her own apartment, but also to suggest that it was Dale who had taken Elsie's keys from her bag after the first murder. The keys, the little automatic, and the open gas jets would be sufficient to indicate that Dale's death was an unwritten confession. Now, even as he accepted all this, Helen spoke.

"It would have worked," she said. "It would have worked, damn you! Another fifteen minutes and the police would have been satisfied." A muscle twitched in her jaw. "Well, maybe it will still work.

"This is the same gun, Jeff. It has four more bullets. The police think she's the one they want, so why shouldn't they think you thought so, too? Why shouldn't she kill you if she thought she was trapped? Why shouldn't she kill herself when she realized there was no other way out for her?"

Jeff heard each word distinctly. He started to move from the arm of the divan on which he had perched himself. He put one hand on the little end table. Then, before he could rise, the buzzer sounded.

For the next few seconds no one moved, no one seemed to breathe. Not until the sound came again was the spell broken, and Helen, still keeping her eyes on Jeff, began a crablike movement toward the door.

"Don't try anything, Jeff," she said. "I've got nothing more to lose."

Then she was at the door, turning the knob. She stepped quickly aside, the gun ready. She was standing that way, tense and im-

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mobile, when Joe Dixon walked into the room. He stopped to look at Jeff, Dale, Helen and, finally, the gun. Still not saying anything, he reached behind him and closed the door.

"Hello, Margo," he said in his habitual whisper. "I see you're still fooling around with a gun." He moved carefully past her. "Hello, Mr. Winship. I decided to give up on this one while I was still ahead."

The woman cursed him then, her phrases as vicious as they were unexpected. Jeff watched her, open-mouthed.

"Margo?" he said. "Was *she* your wife? Was her name Margo Hurst?"

"That's right."

"The one who shot you?"

"I was lucky," Dixon said. "She blew her top and chased me down the hall and then down the stairs. The first shot winged me and then she missed twice."

"Why did she do it?"

"I was fed up. I told her I was going to leave her and get a divorce." He looked at the woman Jeff had known as Helen Mallory. "You took a powder when they let you out, didn't you, Margo? You violated your probation."

He looked back at Jeff and explained how a detective named Harris had found him and learned the truth about Helen's past. He said Elsie had come to him the morning of the day she died and had given him a hundred dollars to come to Jeff's apartment at eleven thirty that night.

"I wasn't sure what she wanted from me, but I was there. So was she," he added, glancing at Helen. "Your wife asked me if this was Margo Hurst and if she'd once shot me. She asked about the probation and when I told her what I knew she said that was all she needed from me. Then I got out and around one o'clock Margo came down to the Club Rocc'o."

He hesitated and Helen said, "Go on, tell him the rest of it, Joe, while you've still got the chance."

Dixon wet his lips and coughed. Suddenly he was not quite so cocky and his low-toned words took on a jerky cadence.

"She told me she'd had a fight with your wife," he said huskily. "She claimed your wife pulled a gun and she'd grabbed for it and it went off. She knew she wouldn't have a chance if the police found out about that other time, but if I kept quiet she'd have a thousand bucks for me the next afternoon.

"She sold me," he said. "She made it sound like it was self-defense anyway. When she showed up with the grand the next day I knew she meant it. I knew she'd have to keep paying me. I figured it would be like an annuity. I must've been off my rocker," and Dixon swore softly.

"What changed your mind, Joe?" Jeff asked.

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"Nancy."

"Ah," said Jeff.

"You talked to her," Dixon said. "You scared her and she got to worrying. She kept nagging me until I told her the truth and then she wouldn't go for it. She said she'd never marry me with all that hanging over my head and I knew she meant it. She said something else too."

He glanced nervously at the gun. "She said if Margo had killed twice before, she'd kill me too in the end. It would just be a question of time because she'd never take the chance that I might talk. That's why I came to your place this morning—I thought I might make a deal. I thought maybe you'd forget about me pulling the gun on you if I was willing to tell the truth."

"You were outside when I got the cab?" Jeff asked.

"Yes, and I followed you," Dixon explained. "I was only half a block behind when you came in here." He glanced again at Helen. "She saw you. When she came in, I tagged along and when I saw your wife's name on the mailbox downstairs I decided to come up."

"That was a mistake, Joe," Helen said.

She spoke in a voice Jeff could hardly hear and he realized that somehow he had to keep her talking.

"Why, Helen?" he said. "Because of the old probation? Because you were afraid you'd have to go back and serve the rest of your sentence?"

"No, you stupid fool," she said contemptuously. "I intended to marry you. I would have married you if you hadn't been such a little gentleman and let Elsie play you for a chump. I've worked hard for what I've got. I hung on to the dress shop—we were practically bankrupt—waiting until you were free. I wanted you not because I was in love with you and not because of the inheritance you were going to get but because you had the background and position I wanted and because I knew you'd be easy to handle."

"Yes," Jeff said. "I guess I would be for someone like you."

"I didn't know what Elsie wanted when I went to your apartment that night she telephoned me. When I found out what she knew, when I saw Joe there, I knew you'd never marry me. She didn't hire that detective because she wanted you back—she did it to spite me! The minute Joe left I started for her. She ran into the bedroom and I chased her . . . I think I would have strangled her if she hadn't pulled the gun."

"You put her on the bed?" Jeff said.

"I didn't know she was dead then. I didn't know what to do. Then I heard someone at the door—"

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"What about the wig?"

The voice that interrupted came from one side and Jeff had to turn to realize it belonged to Dale. She was sitting erect, the sickness gone from her eyes now and her fear controlled.

"If you didn't go there prepared to kill," Dale said, "why would you have a wig?"

"I got that later." Helen looked at Jeff. "I was lucky at your place. No one saw me going in or out. But I knew I had to come here to get Elsie's copies of the reports. I knew I'd have to see that detective before he found out what had happened."

"You were going to kill him when you went there," Dale persisted.

"Shut up," Helen shouted, not even looking at her. "There was this wig at the shop," she said to Jeff. "I sometimes used it when a man with a brunette wife came in and was doubtful how a certain color would look on her."

Jeff nodded—this explained the dark-haired girl who had been seen coming to Helen's apartment hotel that night.

"But you didn't take all of Harris's reports," he said. "You took only the parts that had to do with you and Dixon."

"I knew they'd find out how often you'd been seeing me," said Helen, "and I wanted to be sure they also knew about those weekends you spent with her."

She glanced at Dale and said something else that Jeff did not hear. He was watching her fingers tighten on the gun, not certain what she intended to do but understanding how frustration and hatred had destroyed her reason, her capacity to think.

Even as these thoughts came to him she stopped talking and the room became still. The brown eyes he had once thought so considerate held a trapped and savage gleam, and suddenly Jeff realized that time had run out. The back of his throat was dry, his spine stiff, and when he saw the gun shift he knew he could wait no longer.

He gave Dixon a covert glance, wondering if the musician still had the short-barreled revolver. He himself was still sitting on the arm of the divan, his right hand resting on the edge of the end table, a none too sturdy antique with a heavy ashtray on it.

But the ashtray was toward the rear and he could not reach it without giving himself away. So, his fingers tightening on the front end of the table, he made his attempt, yanking the table out from under the ashtray, twisting the thin legs forward and upward. It was no more than an underhand flip, not meant to inflict any great damage, merely to distract.

"If you've still got that gun—let's go, Joe!" he said as the ashtray clattered to the floor.

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He was still ten feet away when he saw the spinning table bounce off the woman's hip; but by that time he was moving fast and a lot of things were happening almost simultaneously. He saw Helen stagger from the impact of the table and heard the gun go off before she was ready, the slug crashing harmlessly into the ceiling.

He had heard Dixon say, "Okay, dad," and from the corner of his eye he saw the man throw himself sideways and down, and now Helen, steadying herself and having seen the gun in Dixon's hand, must have realized that Dixon presented the more dangerous threat. She fired once more, but Dixon, on one knee, had squeezed off a shot that hammered on the heels of Helen's first one.

That did it. There was an instantaneous silence when the woman's torso jerked and her right hand dropped. Presently a tiny red blotch showed high on the right side of her blouse and her eyes were suddenly wide and incredulous and no longer insane. Yet even as she saw Dixon waiting to fire again she tried desperately to lift the little automatic. It was then that Jeff twisted it from her nerveless fingers and caught her under the arms as she started to sag. When he had eased her into a chair he turned to Dixon.

"Thanks, Joe. Are you all right?"

"Sure." Dixon came to his feet slowly. "She never was much of a shot." He glanced down at the gun in his hand. "But I'll sure catch hell when the cops find out about this."

By then Jeff was bending over Helen, Dale at his side.

"Let me," she said. "You telephone for an ambulance."

Seconds later Jeff was connected with the Seventeenth Precinct and talking to Detective Boyle. It took a while before Boyle got things straight and by that time Dale had wrung out a towel in hot water and was holding it under Helen's bloodstained blouse.

"I don't think it's too bad," Dale said.

"I was afraid of that," Helen murmured. "With any luck it could have just as well been here," and she touched her heart.

Looking down at her like that and seeing the shiny slackness of her face, Jeff felt a cord tighten in his throat. Remembering other times, he felt no resentment or loathing—only pity. In his awkward way he said so.

"I'm sorry, Helen."

She looked up at him, her mouth still twisted but the brown eyes steady in spite of the pain.

"Yes," she said, "I think you are. And do you know something? In spite of everything I think I would have made you a good wife."

Jeff turned away, and Dale

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watched him, an odd mistiness in her eyes until, moments later, there was a knock on the door and Dixon opened it.

Detectives Boyle and Heinemann came in, followed by Estey and a white-suited intern who went to Helen at once. Before the detectives could corner Jeff, he stepped up to Dale and took both her hands in his. He knew it would be a long time before he could really talk to her, but to have any confidence in the future he had to know one thing right away. He put it curiously, hoping she would understand.

"It's going to be rough for a while," he said. "I just want to be sure of one thing. You're still my secretary, aren't you?"

He watched the hazel eyes widen slightly, as though in surprise, and then he saw the gleam of understanding.

"Of course I am," she said softly.

Jeff squeezed her hands and, relaxed now, he turned to face the police . . .

a tip for travelers . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PAUL W. FAIRMAN**

TITLE: ***The Smell of Big Time***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: A city in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Meet Frenchy and Marty Konig and the kid—as full-bodied a trio of characters as you're likely to meet in 2000 words of hard, tough* **Black Mask** *magic . . .*

FRENCHY CALLED ME FROM THE back room. I put the seven ball in the side pocket and won a dollar from Miggs. I laid down my cue, collected the buck, and went back there.

Frenchy owns the pool hall. He weighs three fifty and has a special chair and has his meals sent in from next door. Spaghetti. Always spaghetti, four-five times a day. He's stayed in the pool room since he bought it. About three years.

He had a guy there. A little guy with nothing much, but well dressed. He kept slapping a pair of gray gloves on his crossed knee. Slap—slap—slap. He put his eyes on me and kept them there.

Frenchy's big pan-face grinned a little. "You were saying you'd like a smell of big time?"

It was a silly question. I didn't answer. Who doesn't want a smell of big time?

"This is Marty Konig. He maybe has something for you."

I looked closer at Marty Konig. He kept slapping his gloves. I couldn't see any big time about him and I wondered. He looked like the kind of guy you could push around. The kind you watch in a tavern because maybe he'll stay late and get drunk and you can follow him out. I've made a little jack following drunks out of taverns. It's about all you can find in a town not any bigger than Baywood.

Frenchy's eyes kept going back and forth between Konig and me. His head was so big it was probably trouble to move, so he made his eyes cover lots of territory. Frenchy rumbled, lazy, "He's

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okay, Marty. The kid'll put a heap through the eye of a needle."

Konig said, "Can you do what you're told, kid?"

Maybe he *was* big time and I figured I shouldn't act like a dope. I gave him a scowl. "What's the caper?"

He got up and began pulling on his gloves. "For you it's a trip to the city and a hundred bucks—after you do what you're told."

He didn't ask if it was all right with me. I wondered how he knew that it was. He said, "We'll drive in. I'll pick you up here at 4 A. M. Get some sleep and be here."

He said, "Okay, Frenchy. See you," and he went out.

I asked Frenchy, "Who's the guy? What's his pitch?"

"For the big time, you ask too many questions. Tell Tony to bring me an order."

I went out and ordered the spaghetti.

The world's a hell of a place at 4 A. M. Whether it's cold or not you shiver. You yawn and your stomach feels rotten and you think, nuts to it.

But I made it and Frenchy was up, sitting in his chair. There was a bed in the back room but I don't think he ever used it. Or ever undressed.

Marty Konig came in. He was carrying the gloves and there was no sleep in his eyes. He looked like he didn't know it was four in the morning.

"You had breakfast?"

I hadn't but I said I had. I can't eat breakfast.

"Okay, let's hit it. See you, Frenchy."

He had a black '52 Buick and I drove. He sat beside me with his hands in his topcoat pockets. He looked straight ahead, and I began feeling something about him.

I don't quite know how it is, but sometimes in the back of your mind you get funny flashes of pictures. I saw one of these pictures of Konig, sitting there beside him, driving.

There was a heavy steel door. Konig walked up to it and pushed and the door bent in the middle and I could see the splinters of steel where the door broke. He went on through it and there was a brick wall. He put a hand against the bricks and the wall came down. The bricks fell on him as he walked through, but they didn't hurt him none. He kept on walking, straight ahead . . .

"How old are you, kid?"

"Twenty-two."

Then he began asking all the questions I knew he'd asked Frenchy and had gotten answers to.

"How do you make your jack?"

"I bum from my dad and I pick up dough shooting pool if I hook a sucker. And Frenchy'll buy anything I lift but with him I got to hold it a month. Then, if there's

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no heat, Frenchy'll buy it."

I wanted to ask him how he made his jack, but I didn't.

"Done any time?"

"Six months in the boys' school. Then I got paroled to Frenchy. He's got connections."

After a minute he said, "Maybe you talk too much."

It scared me—him just saying it. I asked why.

"If Frenchy's got tie-ins, that's his business. Why sound off about it?"

"I didn't think I was sounding off."

"You can sound off in one word and send a guy away. Remember that. Always remember you can never say too little."

The sun began coming up. The world looked better. The road was wide and clean. I touched a little hard on the gas and the crate almost jumped out from under us. It was no ordinary '52 Buick.

I said, "Hey! Sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"If you're any good you'd have done it anyway—just to find out for yourself. She'll do a hundred and fifty. Eighty-five in second. Where'd you learn to drive?"

"I drove a cab nights for six months until they took it away from me."

"You drove a cab nights. That's enough. I didn't ask why you quit."

In some ways he was a funny guy, but not in a way to laugh about. Not funny that way. What you could see of him from what he said was kind of scary.

It got hot after a while. Even with the breeze from moving, it was hot, but he didn't take off his coat. We were hitting the suburbs of the city when he said, "What's your idea of big time, kid?"

I thought a little. "Oh, having the jack you need, I guess. And classy dames. Making the cops sit up and take notice when they hear your name."

"Who would you consider a real big time guy?"

"Well—there was Capone . . . Dillinger . . . Pretty Boy Floyd . . ."

"I get it. Your idea of being hot stuff is to be dead."

"Huh? Why?"

"They're all dead."

"But—"

"You're a damn fool. Maybe I made a mistake."

He didn't say anything more except, "Turn here—go up this street. Stop in front of that hotel."

I parked and we went into the hotel and he registered us. I didn't see what he wrote and on the way up in the elevator, I wondered what names he'd used.

In the room he took off his topcoat and looked at his wrist watch. It was gold with some diamonds. The McCoy. He said, "It's ten thirty. You get some sleep because I want you fresh. I've got some checking to do. I'll be back by two at the latest."

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He threw a five dollar bill on the bed. "Have them send up some grub and don't stick your nose out of this room."

After he left I called downstairs. They sent up a bellhop with the menu and I ordered and they brought up the food on a little wagon. It was swell. Real class. I decided that was the way I wanted to live, where you could order punks around and get service.

After that I went to sleep. The bed was like a cloud.

He woke me up by pulling at my shoulder. He said, "Get conscious. There's cold water in the bathroom." Then he waited until I was toweling my face.

"There may not be much to this," he said, "but then again, there might. We'll go over the trip once so you'll have the lay. Then it's the business."

We went downstairs to the Buick.

"Go over two blocks left and hit the boulevard. Keep going south and take it easy. We've got plenty of time."

I used up an hour crossing the city. When he said, "Pull up in front of that building," we were ten miles from the hotel.

He looked at his watch. "We've got half an hour. Take a good look at this place and drive down the street."

I did—wondering. Two blocks down we hit a stop light. "Two blocks," he said. "Remember that. A block further on you hit the left lane and you can swing to the Outer Drive. That's if there's no trouble."

"If there's no trouble."

"If our luck breaks, then it's different. Then it's up to you to show me you can drive. Come trouble, we get away from here—understand?"

I nodded. My hands were cold. "What kind of trouble can there be?"

"The worst. Swing around and go back to that building and park at the curb. I'll get out and I'll be over by the entrance. I've got some business with a guy who'll come out." He looked at his watch.

I didn't know I was driving a car. It seemed to go around the corner and back down the block, and there we were—in front of the Hadley Building.

Marty Konig got out and strolled over to the swinging doors. He stood there looking into the corner drug store window, while people went by and in and out of the building. Marty's hands were in his topcoat pockets. I watched him while the motor hummed up the wheel and into my arms. I watched him, but still I didn't see quite how it happened.

When the right man came out through one of the swinging doors, Marty eased himself into the moving people, behind the man. Then there were two explosions that

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could have been anything. They could have come from a truck. But the man jerked and coughed and went down to his knees. I saw his face as he went down. There was a funny expression on it. An expression like you'd have if you met someone you were scared of and weren't expecting. Then he was on his face down against the pavement.

Marty jumped away from him just the same way everybody else did. People stopped and milled around. They moved back from the man and then surged forward, like water filling a hole.

I waited. I fought an urge to drive the heap away from there. A cop came running across the street. Then I saw Marty. He moved around until he was in line with the cop. He grabbed the cop's arm and pointed into the crowd, yelling something. The cop scowled and dived into the mob.

Marty stuck a cigarette in his mouth and got into the car.

I pulled away from the curb. Two blocks down, the stop light caught me. Marty said, "Relax." The light changed. About three minutes later we were rolling down the Outer Drive.

No trouble.

No trouble at all.

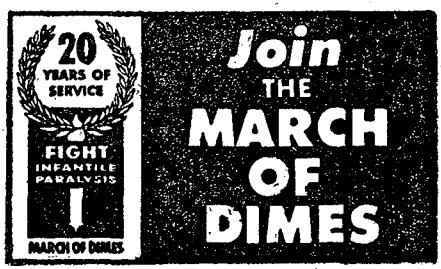
A little further on, Marty said, "Swing off next corner and go west three blocks. Stop in front of a red neon beer sign. I've got to collect."

I sat in front of the tavern, waiting for him. Then he came out. We headed back for Baywood.

About twenty miles from the city, Marty turned his head and looked at me. He said, "Well, you're in big time now, kid." He had thin lips. They said it. He had a face without mercy and hard, gray eyes. His face and eyes said it too. *You're in big time, kid.*

I shivered. I wondered what the other man had done to get killed that way.

But I didn't ask.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***No Parking***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen and Inspector Queen

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The first in a series of cases in which Ellery grapples with three modern problems: the lack of parking space; the lack of living quarters; and the lack of schoolrooms. The second of the series will appear next month.*

MODESTA RYAN PLAYED HER greatest role not on a Broadway stage but in her penthouse on Madison Avenue. The performance took place one midsummer night against a backdrop of flooding rain, thunder, and lightning; power failures darkened some buildings in the Central Park area; and, of course, the Athenia Apartments was one of them. So Modesta even got to play her big scene by the light of candles, a surefire touch.

Ellery was not surprised. Modesta Ryan specialized in melodrama. Everything she touched went off like a rocket. She could not walk her dog without landing on the front page. Her last pet had broken his leash on Fifth Avenue and been run over by a car carrying the ambassador of an Iron Curtain country.

Modesta was spectacularly unlucky in love. She had never married. The men she wanted always seemed to prefer lisping ingénues or hat-check girls, and those who wanted her she could not stand. Her suitors ran to hand-kissers, cigarette holder-smokers, jodhpur-wearers, and gloomy college boys with mother fixations.

But suddenly, there he was. It was too impossibly wonderful.

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There he was—all three of him.

For naturally, when the right man did come along, two others equally right showed up, too.

It was a typical Modesta Ryan sensation, and for some months Broadway speculated on little else. Which of the three would she marry?

Jock Shanville was male lead in the new play Modesta was rehearsing, a costume piece set in medieval Venice. It was type casting, for besides flaunting a doge's profile, a wicked eye, and a fine leg in tights, Shanville excelled in scene stealing, reputation poisoning, character assassination, and other closet-arts of the theater. Jock had a wife, an ex-show girl named Pearline, but she was no problem; his rapier tongue had been backing her toward the nearest divorce court long before he decided on Modesta Ryan as her successor.

Then there was Kid Catt, a black-browed fighting machine who dealt bloody unconsciousness from both fists with a cold smile that had become his TV trademark. The Kid's body was his god, self-denial his creed; and women sat high on his proscribed list. So when he fell in love with Modesta it was with the violent passion of a fallen monk. Modesta found holding the beautiful young brute at bay an enchanting experience.

Richard Van Olde II, however, was a quite different temptation Van Olde was a soft-spoken tyrant of position and wealth. Modesta Ryan was the first woman he had wanted since the death of his wife a dozen years before, and he meant to have her. He was a man of instant, irrevocable decisions, and he offered Modesta marriage from the first, courting her tirelessly. There was something about his lashless eyes and noiseless personality that made her shiver like an inexperienced girl.

Jock Shanville fitted her like a glove, young Catt excited her, Van Olde fascinated her.

Which should she accept?

The phone rang just as Ellery was stooping to unlace his shoes.

"It's for you," Inspector Queen called from the other bedroom.

"At a quarter to twelve?" Ellery used the extension. "Yes?"

"Ellery? Modesta Ryan . . ."

"Modesta." Ellery fingered his tie automatically. He had known her for years, and each time he heard her voice was like the first time. Tonight the throaty tones had a throb in them, subdued and off-beat. "What's wrong?"

"Ellery, I'm in trouble," she whispered. "Can you come right over to my apartment? Please."

"Of course. But what kind of trouble?"

"I can't talk. I'm not alone—"

"This marriage business?"

"Yes, I decided today. Gave the

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other two their walking papers. But hurry!"

"Modesta, wait. Just tell me who's with you—"

But the phone went dead. Ellery grabbed his raincoat and ran.

The streets were empty rivers, and he roared east toward Central Park leaving a wake like a power launch. He was through the park transverse and across Fifth and Madison Avenues in a matter of minutes. Sixty seconds later he was sloshing around the corner of Park Avenue into a one-way westbound street in the East Eighties, peering through his streaming windshield for a parking space.

As far down the street as he could see, the curbs were jammed with cars bumper to bumper.

Ellery cruised, trying to control his temper. You could never find a parking space in New York, least of all when you were in a hurry. And when it rained—

The Athenia Apartments was on the northeast corner, just off Madison Avenue. Between the corner and the Athenia's canopy he sighted empty curb and he stepped on the gas. But when he got there he saw a No Parking sign; it was a crosstown bus stop. Wouldn't you know! Back into Madison Avenue he drove, and he circumnavigated the block, ready to settle for a dozen feet of curb anywhere. But the curbs were all occupied. He turned into Modesta's street again, worried and furious.

God knows what's happening up there, he thought angrily. He was tempted to park at the bus stop; but a family respect for the law, and the prospect of squatting half a day in Traffic Court, dissuaded him.

No miracle had happened. There was still no place to park on Modesta's street. Groaning, Ellery turned up Madison Avenue again.

"This is my last time on this merry-go-round," he promised himself grittily. "Modesta must think I'm coming by pack mule. I'll double-park."

The last time around he had noticed one car illegally parked. At the curb between the Athenia's canopy and the entrance of the next building stood three cars in a row, and a fourth was double-parked by the side of the middle one. The double-parked car bore an MD license plate.

Again Ellery drove up the block from Park Avenue toward Madison. He was about to pull in behind the doctor's car when two young couples dashed out of the apartment house on the southeast corner, splashed toward the Athenia's canopy, and jumped into the first of the three parked cars.

"Hurray," Ellery said sourly; and when his rescuers pulled away he shot around the double-parked car and backed like a fireman into the vacated space nearest the canopy.

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Five minutes past midnight! He had lost ten minutes finding a space. And he'd been lucky at that.

Ellery was under the Athenia's canopy in two jumps. He ran into the lobby, swishing the water off his hat. The lobby was dark. Basement flooded, probably, shorting the power mains.

"Doorman?" he shouted into the darkness.

"Comin'." A flashlight snapped on and bobbed quickly toward him. "Who'd you want to see, sir?"

"Miss Ryan, penthouse. Elevator out?"

"Uh-huh." The doorman seemed dubious. "It's pretty late. The house phone's not workin', either."

"I'm expected," said Ellery. "Where's the stairway? Speak up!"

The doorman stared, then mumbled, "This way."

The man shuffled toward the rear of the lobby past the dead switchboard, flashing his light behind him for Ellery. As they reached the emergency door it opened and a male figure hurried past them and vanished in the darkness. Ellery caught one glimpse of the figure as it scuttled by—stooped over, so that his height and age were impossible to guess, wearing a double-breasted tan trench coat buttoned up the left side to the chin, and a tan Stetson pulled well down over his face.

Something about the man bothered Ellery, but he had no time to analyze.

He ran up marble stairs endlessly, praying that the battery of his pencil-flashlight would hold out. When he reached the penthouse landing eleven flights up he was seeing phosphorescent confetti in the darkness. Breathing hard, he swept his light about, located the push-button near the service door, and leaned on it. He heard a buzz inside the apartment, but nothing else.

He tried the door. It was unlocked.

Ellery stepped into Modesta Ryan's country-style kitchen. A candle-glass was wavering eerily on the fireplace mantel; a bed of briquets had burned to embers.

"Modesta?"

He stepped through the swinging door into her dining room, feeling his scalp tickle. A candlestick on the sideboard illuminated the room fitfully. The hall beyond was dark.

"Modesta?"

He groped along the passage, playing his flash, no longer calling. He kept telling himself as the shadows parted in his path that Modesta was quite capable of an elaborate joke, picking a night like this for atmosphere.

For a moment, as he stepped into her living room, he was sure of it. Two seven-branched candelabra blazed, and in the focus of their flames, in an exquisite negligee, lay Modesta's lovely body. She was crumpled on the Italian

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tile floor beside her mother-of-pearl grand piano. On the breast of her negligee there was an illusion of a bullet wound and blood . . . Ellery knelt. The stuff staining her breast looked exactly like ketchup.

But it was not. And the silk was scorched around a very real hole.

He hunted for her pulse. There it was!—but it was flickering like the candles. She was barely alive.

Ellery ran to the phone more out of habit than conviction. To his surprise it was working. He made two calls—one for an emergency ambulance, the other to his father; and then he tore through the apartment to the service door and began leaping down the eleven flights like a mountain goat.

If she dies, he was thinking, *those parked cars around here ought to be tagged as accessories.* The ten minutes he had lost looking for a parking space might have saved what was left of Modesta Ryan's life.

He plunged out under the canopy, followed by the astonished doorman. Nothing had changed. The cloudburst continued to swab down the streets. The same three cars were lined up between the Athenia's entrance and the adjoining building, his own foremost; the same doctor's car was still double-parked beside the middle car of the three, boxing it in.

Of course the man in the trench coat was gone.

"Then this is the way it went, Wladeczki?" Inspector Queen said to the doorman in the light of the police torches. "You were on duty since four p.m., due to go off at midnight, but you stayed on because the storm held up your relief man. You didn't leave this lobby at any time. Nobody could have sneaked past you, you say. All right.

"Miss Ryan come home from rehearsal in a taxi about seven p.m. She was alone. About eight her maid left for the night. Between eight and a few minutes past eleven only five people entered or left the building. They are all long-time tenants. At eleven thirty Mr. Trench Coat walks into the lobby. Five minutes later an M.D. on emergency call to an old lady tenant—who's very sick in 4-G—drives up and complains to you he can't find space for his car. You let the doctor double-park—"

"And he's still up in 4-G," said Sergeant Velie. "The other five, the tenants, alibi okay, too."

"Now about Mr. Trench Coat. He didn't come by cab, you say. You don't get a real good look at him by your flash, the way he has his hat pulled down and his collar turned up. He talks in a croaky whisper, as if he has a bad cold. He says he has an appointment with Miss Modesta Ryan, you tell him he'll have to walk up to the penthouse, he goes up the stairway, and that's the last you see

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of him till a few minutes past midnight when he ducks out the stairway door under your nose—and the nose," added the Inspector gently, "of the eminent Mr. Queen here."

Ellery gave his father a wan look. "Did you notice," he asked the doorman, "how wet his trench coat and hat were when he first came into the lobby?"

"No wetter than yours was, Mr. Queen," said the doorman. "Got my name spelled right, Sergeant?"

"Time will tell," said the Sergeant. "Hey, Goldie. Well?"

Detective Goldberg came in, shaking himself like a dog. He had found Modesta Ryan's maid asleep in her Harlem flat, he reported; the maid knew nothing except that on Miss Ryan's arrival home she had made three phone calls—one to Kid Catt, one to Mr. Shanville, and the last to Mr. Van Olde. But the maid hadn't listened to the conversations, so she couldn't say which ones Miss Ryan had given the heave and which one she'd made the happy man.

"Any report from the hospital yet?" muttered the Inspector.

"She's this way that way," said Sergeant Velie.

"But did she talk?"

"She's got all she can do to keep on breathing, Inspector. She's still unconscious."

"Then we do it the hard way," said the old man gloomily. "It's a cinch Trench Coat was one of Modesta's two rejects. He didn't waste any time, did he? As soon as those three are brought in, have 'em taken up to the penthouse. Coming, Ellery?"

His son sighed. "If I could have found a place to park as soon as I got here . . ."

Hollow laughter followed him to the stairway door.

At twenty minutes after two the Inspector finished with the last of the three interrogations. He found Ellery in Modesta Ryan's living room staring reproachfully at her phone.

"Any luck?"

"I've called every columnist in town, all her close friends. She just didn't tell anybody."

The old man grunted. He stuck his head into the hall. "Get those cuties in here."

Shanville made his entrance with a rather set smile. The disheveled blond hair was all dagger points, and with the slight upcurve of his lips he looked Satanic.

"What now?" he asked. "The rack?"

About Kid Catt there was a look of astounded suffering, as if he had just been knocked down. His powerful frame sagged into a chair and his black eyes stared dully at the chalkmarks on the tiles near the piano.

"Who did it?" the fighter mumbled. "Just tell me which one of these two——did it."

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"Underplay, Kid," said the actor pleasantly. "This is a professional audience."

The black eyes looked at him. "Lay off, actor," the Kid said.

"Or else?" smiled Shanville.

"I'm leaving," said Richard Van Olde II abruptly.

The tycoon was very angry. His naturally pale skin was almost green, the lashless eyes murderous.

"Just another few minutes, Mr. Van Olde," said Inspector Queen.

"A very few, please. Then I either walk out of here unmolested or I telephone my attorneys and the Commissioner."

"Yes, *sir*. Now, gentlemen, each of you wanted to marry Miss Ryan —bad. And each of you got a phone call from her tonight. One she told she'd finally decided to marry. Two—the other two—she brushed. One of those two promptly came here tonight and shot her.

"You think you've got us stymied," the Inspector went on, showing his dentures. "Each man was found home in bed. And while we have the bullet—probably from a .38—search of your respective premises has failed to turn up the gun. Or the trench coat or Stetson. On top of that, each claims *he* was the man Modesta told over the phone she was accepting! Two of those claims are lies, of course, to take the heat off. But right now we can't tell which two.

"Gentlemen, I have news for you," said Inspector Queen softly. "Thrown-away guns, coats, and hats have a way of turning up. And you've got no alibis for the time of the shooting. You were home in bed, say all of you, but none of you can prove it, not even you, Shanville, because you occupy a separate bedroom and weren't even heard coming home—"

"Are you quite finished?" asked Richard Van Olde.

"Not yet, sir!"

"Dad."

The Inspector looked around, surprised. Ellery was on his feet, the picture of wry hopelessness.

"I don't see any point to going any further with this now, do you? Let's call it a night. These gentlemen won't run away, and we can all use some sleep."

The old man blinked.

"All right," he said.

But when the three had gone, he growled to his son, "And what's the big plot, Master Mind?"

"It's simple enough," Ellery said as they crouched near the glass outer doors of the lobby. It was after three, the rain had stopped, and the chrome on the dark cars outside winked damply in the street lights. "We're waiting for our friend to come back."

"Come *back?*" said Sergeant Velie. "What is he, goofed?"

"Case of necessity, Velie," murmured Ellery. "Consider. How did

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Trench Coat get to the Athenia last night?"

"*Get* here?"

"Yes. By cab? No, says the doorman. On foot? No, because if he'd walked or even run from as close by as the corner of Madison he'd have been soaked in that downpour, whereas the doorman said his trench coat and hat were no wetter than mine when I got here—and I had to make only two jumps from my car to get under the canopy. Conclusion? *Trench Coat came in a car, and he parked almost as close to the canopy as I did.*"

His father made a strangled sort of sound.

"Now, the nearest parked cars are those four between the Athenia's canopy and the next building—my car, the two behind mine, and the M.D.'s, double-parked beside the one behind mine. Well, which of the four was Trench Coat's? Not mine, of course, or the car mine replaced—the people who drove off in that one came from the building across the street; what's more, they drove away before Trench Coat left the Athenia.

"So Trench Coat's car must be one of the other three. Which one?

"Let's see. Trench Coat made his escape just as I was going up to Modesta's apartment. You'd expect him to jump into his car—one of those three—and drive off. Did he? No—when I rushed downstairs after finding Modesta shot, all three cars were still parked. Why didn't he take his car for his getaway? *Obviously, because he couldn't.* His car must be the one behind mine, the middle one of the three at the curb—the one that's boxed in by the doctor's car!"

The Inspector sounded punchy. "So that's why you moved your jalopy away . . . to give him room to get his car out when he thinks the coast is clear."

"That's the idea," said Ellery.

"Now all you have to do," said the Sergeant, not without bitterness, "is tell us who you see in your crystal ball."

"Why, So-and-So," replied Ellery, naming a name; and at their exclamations he grinned. "At least, I'm ninety-nine per cent sure."

At four fifteen a.m. a furtive figure skulked suddenly past the Athenia, darted into the designated car, and fought cattishly but in vain to shake off Sergeant Velie's paralyzing clutch.

It was, as Ellery had predicted, So-and So.

By the time they booked their catch downtown and sat in on the confession, the city was driving to work. They crawled uptown in Ellery's car to the hospital.

It was while Inspector Queen went off to inquire about Modesta that Sergeant Velie seemed to come

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out of a fog. "Can I be *that* stupid, Ellery? I still don't see how you could—"

"Console yourself," soothed Ellery. "The doorman and I saw Trench Coat; you didn't. When he hurried past us at the stairway door, I was bothered by something in his appearance. Later I realized what it had been: he'd had his double-breasted coat buttoned down the *left* side. It's women who are left-side buttoners; men are the reverse. So I knew Trench Coat was a woman dressed as a man. Which woman? Van Olde's a widower, Kid Catt's a bachelor, and neither has any entangling alliances. But Jock Shanville's married, so his wife was an odds-on bet. As she told us, she eavesdropped on Modesta's call, heard that she was through as Mrs. Shanville, and proceeded—with the help of her theatrical training—to do something about it."

The Sergeant was still shaking his head when the Inspector came back, all smiles. Modesta would live—although she'd have to have new evening gowns designed—and she had satisfactorily fingered Pearline Shanville as the jealous witch who had ruined her *décolletage*.

Then they shuffled blearily out to Ellery's car and he found a ticket on it for parking in a restricted hospital zone.

NEXT MONTH . . .

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Special ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Anniversary Issue

ROY VICKERS's *Wife Missing*

CORNELL WOOLRICH's *Don't Bet on Murder*

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